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The RED ALPHABE

A Book-Length Novel
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The BAD SAMARITAN

A Novelette of the Sea

The WINDS OF THE WORL

A Tale of India

by

TALBOT MUNI

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Some of Adventure's Writers

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Newspaper-man, hunter, traveler.

Dr. J. U. GIESY
Practising physician, Salt Lake City.

SAMUEL ALEXANDER WHITE
Years spent in the open in Canada and the Labrador.

ARTHUR A. NELSON
New York business man.

WILLIAM WEST
U. S. Forest ranger on the Black Mesa Reserve. Turpentine-camp foreman. Lawyer.

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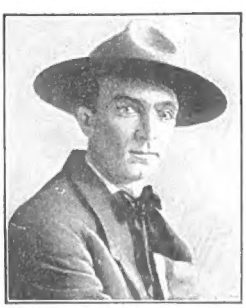

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VOL. 10 No. 4

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"GOLD AT SEA"

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Another complete novelette. A tale of the first Balkan war by Corinne and Radislav Tsanoff, whose splendid stories of Bulgaria are already favorites with our readers.

And—but turn to "The Trail Ahead," on page 224, for the other big features in the September ADVENTURE.

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Adventure

AUG. 1915 Vol. 10 No. 4

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The RED ALPHABET

A COMPLETE NOVEL

By

Raymond Barrett

"TURN to your right, walk five paces ahead, and stand still."

Five paces took me through a pair of closed portières, and into what was evidently the living-room of a bachelor's suite. But the bachelor was not in sight.

At the end farthest from me a bay window broke the severe oblong of the room and formed a little alcove. The heavy curtains hung in the arch had been drawn closely together, so that they hid every corner of the alcove; but through the bend of the arch floated blue wreaths of cigar smoke.

"Sit down in that chair beside you and keep your hands in sight. If you make a false move I'll shoot to kill." The voice was deep and masculine, curiously muffled by the hangings of the archway; its determination was unmistakable.

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I seated myself with a little laugh of derision, dropped my hat on the floor beside me, crossed my legs easily, and clasped my hands on my knees.

"Comfortable?" asked the voice.

"I'd be more so if I had the mate to that cigar."

"Catch, then!"

A cigar was deftly flicked over the curtains and into my eager hands. It was unquestionably a good cigar, and I lighted it with frank relish. It was some time since I had tasted a decent bit of tobacco.

"All right," I announced. "Bring on your next mystery."

"What's your name?"

"John Smith."

"That will do as well as any other, I suppose; but I gave you credit for more imagination."

"What shall I call you?"

I thought he hesitated a moment; then came the curious answer—

"Well, if you must have a handle, call me A."

"X would be more appropriate; but it doesn't matter."

"Now, John Smith, are you convinced what will happen to you if you try any tricks?"

"I don't believe you have a gun, but I'm not going to start anything."

"Good! You're a college man, I take it?"

"Yes."

"What college?"

"Smith—perhaps."

"Just as you like," laughed A. "At present I understand you are panhandling the free-lunch saloons for a living, and sleeping in ten-cent lodging-houses?"

"Correct."

"How would you like to live here?"

"With you?"

"Alone, except for a man-servant."

"I could get along without the servant."

"He goes with the rooms."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Think you could hold down the position of private secretary to Colonel Victor Fairchild?"

"I'd have answered his ad. if I had had anything but these dirty rags."

"I'll supply the proper outfit. I want a man in that position who will tip me off to the corner in Petroleum Central that Fairchild and Kemble are engineering for the Railroad Pool. I suppose you read the papers?"

"Enough to know that a man with advance information on the Pool could clean up a million."

"Good! You'll do!"

"But supposing I don't suit the Colonel?"

"You will, if I send you."

"And how can you be sure I'll be faithful to you?"

"You won't dare be otherwise."

"Won't dare?" I half started to my feet, but the deep voice warned me sharply:

"Sit down! Put your hands in your lap!" The short blue muzzle of an automatic revolver flashed for a moment between the hangings of the archway. "I'm taking no chances, Smith; you risked your life just now. You're a cheap bum, if you are a college graduate. I've had you watched for weeks, and I know you haven't a friend or a dollar between you and the river. I could smuggle your body out of here without any one's knowing or caring, while you wouldn't know me if you met me face to face."

"I'd know your voice," I thought; but I made no answer, for his statements were true.

THIS man who called himself A had me completely at his mercy; and from his evident willingness to make the most of his advantage, I suspected that there was more to the affair than had been revealed by the apparent frankness of my calloused tempter. And I had been led into it by a woman—a woman who, I had fondly thought, had detected the gentleman in me and been willing to trust me in her hour of need!

I had been idling on the city's busiest corner—envying, after the manner of my kind, those luckier than I. Into the range of my jaundiced vision had come a woman so beautiful, so sweet, so altogether desirable, that I caught my breath with the exquisite pain of her loveliness. And this with only a broken glimpse of her through the shifting crowd, as she paused to give some instructions to her chauffeur.

I followed her white-plumed hat, panting for a closer view of her. But the turnstile-doors of the great dry-goods store were jammed with chattering women; and when I finally won through, my lady was nowhere

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in sight. In vain I searched the crowded aisles; I had only the suspicious attention of the floor-managers for my pains. And when I reached the sidewalk again, her coupé was gone.

More bitter than before, I resumed my aimless study of the passing throng till a blow in the side took my attention from everything else. My ribs have always been humiliatingly sensitive; and a jab from a sharp elbow, such as I had just received, causes me acute agony. I turned, fighting mad, expecting to find some practical joker grinning in enjoyment of my anguish.

Instead, to my unbounded astonishment, the owner of the sharp elbow was the delightfully pretty young woman with the white-plumed hat, whose rounded figure made the possession of so deadly an elbow all the more remarkable. I might have doubted my eyes, but she was apologizing almost tearfully for her unintentional rudeness.

"I slipped and turned my ankle," she explained, blushing adorably under my admiring eyes. "I'm afraid I hurt you dreadfully."

She nodded adieu and hobbled toward the curb, as if about to cross the street. Forgetful of our contrasting appearances I slid a hand under her arm and helped her solicitously through the crowd.

"You're limping," I said. "Can't I do something for you?"

"Would you?" She raised her big eyes appealingly, and the corners of her sweet mouth quivered.

"Try me!" I challenged.

She slipped easily from my grasp and plunged into the thick of the crowd ahead; but in my ears echoed her whisper—

"Follow me then."

I am not particularly romantic, nor given to taking advantage of chance acquaintances; but something in her manner even more than her words seemed to beckon me. So I plunged after, and succeeded in keeping her in sight, but I could not again catch up with her.

Men who growlingly resented my attempt to shoulder past them were charmed by her smile into clearing a way for her. And I noticed that she no longer limped. When we had covered in this fashion the two blocks to the Avenue, I had settled two things: first, that my divinity had no intention of trying to escape; and second, that she did not wish me to approach nearer than half a block.

I realized now that only the press of the crowded corner had permitted our moment of intimacy; if I should attempt to approach her here, in this lesser throng, I should bring trouble upon myself and embarrassment to her. But she at least had recognized that a man might be "on his uppers" and still be a gentleman; she had not been afraid to let me touch her; and she had appealed to me for help. Had she been less charming, or I more presentable, I might have suspected her of some sordid motive; as it was I could only wonder and obey.

My wonder grew as we approached the region of homes and apartment buildings. Whither was she leading me? How had she so soon recovered from her limp? The white plume swung jauntily into the entrance of the Transom Court apartment building, and without a backward glance my divinity disappeared.

I knew something of this apartment building. It was let out in furnished suites to the modestly well-to-do, and I chuckled grimly at the reception that one of my appearance might expect to meet there. As if to visualize my thoughts, something tumbled out of the entrance, hurriedly gathered itself together, and came limping toward me. It was a crippled beggar, frowzy and forbidding of appearance, who had left half his stock behind him in his haste to get away. Despite his limp he passed me at a gait that sent the shoe-laces on his arm stringing out behind him; and his muttered remarks were chiefly in the forbidden tongue.

Thinking that I might soon find myself in a similar plight, I turned into the entrance and looked about the marble lobby. The girl of the white plume was nowhere to be seen; but a sturdy young mulatto, still wroth over the recent invasion of his domain, stood in the door of his elevator-cage, and growled—

"What *you* want?"

"The lady with the white plume——"

"Step right in, sir; I'll take you up," was the astonishing answer, given with a servility that spoke of heavy tips.

With equal civility the elevator man opened his door at the fourth floor.

"Third door to the right, sir."

"What is the lady's name?"

"Third door, sir—you're to walk right in."

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Walking into young ladies' apartments unannounced, especially when I do not even know their names, is not a frequent diversion with me; but my protest was drowned in the clang of the elevator door, and the rumble of the descending cage. If the apartment house had been less respectable, or I more so, I might have followed my directions less blindly. But I was becoming slightly angry at all these petty mysteries, and beginning to think that I was being played with. So I slouched down the soft-carpeted hall, opened the door indicated, closed it behind me, and waited for something to happen.

It was then that the voice of A had summoned me into the front room of the suite. The same voice, somewhat impatient, now broke in on my cogitation.

"Well? Have you gone to sleep? What do you say?"

What should I say? I had no particular desire to mess into dirty business, even for the sake of a decent bed and three meals a day; but neither did I like the idea of being bundled out of the place dead, and dropped into the river.

"What is there in it for me?" I asked.

"These soft quarters, a good man-servant, and two hundred a month cold cash—besides whatever you can get out of Fairchild."

"And if I don't accept you'll take me out in a sack?"

"Not at all. You'll be turned out with a ten-spot for the valuable time you've wasted. You've got nothing on me, remember."

"I know where you live."

A laughed deeply.

"Oh, no, you don't! This apartment is just being put in order for a gentleman named John Smith— You see I had already christened you. If you came back you would find only an untenanted suite, and a mystery that would never be solved."

"And the young lady with the white plume?" I suggested after further thought.

"I admire your patience. I expected that would be your first question."

"Should I see her again—if I took the job?"

"That is for her to say."

"I'll take it."

"Then step this way, sir, if you please," he said quickly.

IN SPITE of the ugly warning that I had received I whirled sharply about, for the voice had come from behind me. Even as I turned I half expected to hear the bark of the blue automatic and to feel the sting of lead; but A only laughed.

Behind me, with his hands clasped meekly before him and his eyes fixed attentively upon the curtained alcove, stood a man who is best described by the adjective "insignificant." His shaven face was unlined and expressionless; his eyes were dull and of no particular color; his voice was soft and toneless; his manner was that of the perfectly-trained, self-effacing servant; and his clothing was equally lacking in character. Had I passed him on the street a dozen times a day I doubt if I should have noticed him, or been able to recall his appearance. He was so drab in color, so unobtrusive in manner, that he gave the impression of being undersized, though I learned later that he was of average height and well muscled.

"This is Amos Dodge, your man-servant," said the curtained voice of A.

"Amos and I will get along better if he is a little more noisy," I snapped, for I was not yet sure that the man had not nearly caused my death.

Dodge bowed respectfully but looked at the smoke-haloed curtains, as if for further instructions.

"Dodge will fit you out with clothes and credentials," continued A, "and tell you all that you need to know. You will report to me through him, and receive my instructions from him. In all other respects he will be your servant. Are you satisfied?"

I nodded sullenly, but I was not at all satisfied. I didn't like the nasty business I was undertaking. I didn't like the threatening mysteries that hedged me about. I didn't like my insignificant servant-master Dodge. And least of all did I like this brutal hidden A, who spoke the cultured tongue of the gentleman with a perceptible effort, and who baited his dirty trap with pretty women.

"This way, sir, if you please," repeated Dodge, holding aside the portières for me to pass into the hall.

For a moment I hesitated; then I turned and meekly followed Dodge. I knew I was sitting blindfolded into a crooked game—but I wanted to know what the game was, and who was playing it; and I was hungry

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for a chance to see that girl again—under more conventional circumstances.

II

A'S INSTRUCTIONS, as conveyed by Dodge, were simple but comprehensive. I was to keep my eyes and ears open, and report everything concerning Colonel Fairchild's affairs that came under my observation, leaving it to A to judge its importance. In all other respects I was to fill the secretaryship to the best of my ability.

On one point I insisted: I would do nothing that might make me liable to the law. I would neither steal, nor forge, nor do violence at A's behest; and Dodge, smiling faintly at my vehemence, assured me that A would require of me nothing beyond accurate information. With this I was content, for I had no heroic intention of trying to deceive A and warn the Colonel; and it was with a not unpleasant thrill of excitement that I put myself into the hands of my servant-master.

Contrary to the custom of the average "bum," I had allowed my beard to grow at will. Dodge trimmed this wild growth into a neat Van Dyke, and touched hair and beard with a tincture that gave them a ruddy tinge. He altered the shape of my eyebrows, added a pair of heavy-bowed spectacles with plain glasses, and fitted gold shells to two of my most prominent teeth. Finally, he provided me with a wardrobe suitable to my new station in life. And when I viewed myself in the mirror, I felt that I needed an introduction to the stranger who stared back at me.

The Fairchild butler informed me that the Colonel would see me presently, and asked me to wait in the library. This was a fine big room, apparently half office, half den; for while it contained a well-littered desk, a safe and a typewriter, it was equally well provided with masculine comforts.

The littered desk caught my attention immediately. But as a stranger I did not dare undertake an investigation which as the private secretary I should be able to make at my leisure. I found a comfortable seat in an inconspicuous corner and watched through the open door the comings and goings of the household.

Many persons inquired for the Colonel, only to be refused with polite firmness; but one man, whose name I did not catch, was admitted with a celerity that marked him as a frequent and welcome visitor.

I have seldom seen a handsomer man, though I think it was his air rather than his regular features that made his appearance so striking. He was dark, above the average height, and lithe, in spite of his evident weight and strength. His eye was keen and cold; his every movement spoke of controlled nerves and a mighty will; he impressed me as a man masterful to mercilessness. The one incongruous touch was his dress, which was exquisitely perfect. It seemed to me that he was made for bigger things than the wearing of fastidious apparel.

This fine gentleman, after several times passing the library door, came strolling in with the air of being perfectly at home. Evidently he had assured himself that the room was unoccupied, for he went directly to the desk and began rapidly but calmly searching through the papers. What prompted me to do it I can't say, unless it was that I have an antipathy for overdressed men; but I stepped out of my corner, and said without trying to hide my contempt—

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

To my surprise, the man did not jump. He turned slowly, still holding the paper last taken up, and surveyed me with a nonchalance that I could not but admire.

"What business is it of yours?" he asked, as he might have asked a servant for a glass of water.

"I hope to be Colonel Fairchild's private secretary."

He started at that, and gave me a sharp glance out of his cold black eyes. Then he turned to resume his search of the littered desk, saying carelessly—

"I shall certainly mention your zeal to the Colonel."

The cool contempt in his words baffled and angered me. I took a quick step forward, when some one bustled into the room with a cheery "Hello, Harry!" and I turned to face my prospective employer.

Colonel Victor Fairchild had been one of the most daring fighters of the Civil War. He was as full of fight as ever; but the years which had tonsured his head and grayed his military mustache and imperial had sapped his nervous energy, so that little things irritated him into fussiness.

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Now, sensing conflict like the old war-horse he was, he stood with hand half outstretched, while his bright old eyes snapped under their bushy white brows. He looked from my half-aggressive attitude to my opponent's wholly contemptuous one, and barked at us indiscriminately.

"What's this? What's this? Who is this man, Kemble?"

"Kemble! The name made me start, and inwardly curse myself for a dullard. I was a pretty spy, not to have recognized in my fine gentleman Harrison Kemble, the junior partner of Fairchild & Kemble, and the most brilliant society leader of a generation.

"I'm Smith, Colonel—John Smith. I've come in answer to your advertisement for a secretary."

"I advertised for a gentleman," snapped the Colonel, "and you prove your breeding by picking a quarrel with my friend and partner!"

I know I flushed at that, but Kemble promptly explained and commended my zeal as he had promised—all with an air of tolerant contempt that hurt me more than the Colonel's hasty words.

"Well! well!" chattered the old man. "Don't let it happen again, Smith. I was nearly court-martialed once because I took a battery when I had been ordered merely to make a reconnoissance in force." He chuckled at the reminiscence, and forgot his irritation. "Can you wait, Harry? I must have a secretary, and this young man is the only person who has answered my ad."

Kemble glanced at me with new interest, agreed to wait, and left us together.

Colonel Fairchild, as directing member of the brokerage firm of Fairchild & Kemble, had been empowered by a pool of millionaire railroad operators to secure the control of Petroleum Central, a road which had suddenly become important through the discovery of a very rich oil field. The Colonel was also president of the recently appointed Vice Commission, with full authority to clean up the city; and he was just aching to get into the fight.

What he required in a secretary was not so much an amanuensis as a man who had the ability, nerve, and physical strength to take an active part in his affairs—to act as his aide, as he expressed it. Luckily, both my college work and a natural liking for such things had given me a working knowledge of politics, economics, and sociology; and at the end of a half-hour quiz, the Colonel was good enough to say that, if my record was equal to my information, I would do.

That record of mine had been most carefully and skilfully prepared at A's direction. It consisted of time-worn letters from dead college professors, a perfectly legitimate diploma from a prominent university advising whom it might concern that one John Smith had been graduated as a Bachelor of Arts "*cum laude*," and several exceedingly flattering letters of recommendation from men of influence. As the Colonel chattered approvingly over this imposing array of evidence I modestly made the suggestion which, Dodge had assured me, would make me secure in my false position.

"I wish you would call some of those men on the 'phone, Colonel, and ask them to verify what they have written."

The sharp old eyes flashed up at me.

"Any particular ones?"

"All of them, if you like."

"It's not a bad idea—not a bad idea."

He telephoned in turn to three or four of my most prominent sponsors; and each of them evidently assured him that John Smith was the very man he needed. How A had managed it I did not know, but the Colonel was convinced.

"That's enough!" he cried, pushing my spurious credentials back to me and offering his cigar case. "What salary do you want? And when can you begin?"

BUT now that the position was mine, I was by no means sure that I wanted it. Had I reached that point honestly I should have accepted with alacrity. I liked the Colonel immensely, and I knew that I should enjoy the work; but I hated more than ever the despicable part I should have to play. To keep the Colonel talking while I reached a decision, I named a salary which I knew to be absurdly high. His instant agreement left me floundering more helplessly than ever. And just then a voice that made me shiver delightfully asked—

"Can you spare me a minute, papa?"

And into the room floated my lady of the white plume.

Dazedly I arose to my feet, to be presented by the proud Colonel.

"Virginia, this is Mr. Smith, my new secretary. My daughter, Smith."

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The girl gave me her hand and welcomed me sweetly into the family; but there was neither recognition nor warning in her calm eyes.

"I'm glad to meet Miss Fairchild again," I blundered.

"Again?" she repeated curiously.

"I think I saw you walking on the Avenue yesterday."

"But you were in the house all day, Jinny—you had a headache!" chattered the Colonel, irritated into fussiness by this trivial thing.

"I was shopping in the afternoon," she reminded him gently, "but I was not on the Avenue."

Then she began to speak of more intimate things; and I walked apart, but turned to watch her.

I could not be mistaken. She had the same voice, the same eyes, the same beauties of face and carriage. Why, the very clothes she wore were identical, even to the tilt of the big hat and the jaunty swing of its white plume.

Virginia kissed her father and gave me a sweetly indifferent good day.

"Well, Smith," said the Colonel, still fondly following her with his eyes, "when do you want to begin?"

I dragged my eyes away from the disappearing white plume, walked back to the desk, and sat down.

"Right now."

THE COLONEL'S most important work was directed from his library. Office routine irritated him, whereas the quiet atmosphere of his library seemed to be a tonic; then, too, he liked to have Virginia near him. She was constantly running in to exchange a few laughing words with him; and she never left the house without first coming to kiss him good-by. Sometimes she would sit with us for an hour or more, embroidering, or playing softly on the grand piano; and she never seemed to be in the way. In consequence of this homelike arrangement, I saw much of Virginia.

And as a further result I saw much of Kemble, who came and went as he liked, and who invaded the library in search of Virginia more often than pleased me. Kemble had sold the greater part of his father's half interest in the brokerage firm to the Colonel, for he had no liking for business. His acknowledged ambition was to lead his social set, and I early decided that he expected to marry Virginia; of her feeling for him I could get no inkling.

The man puzzled me. My first impression, that he was too big a man to waste himself on the follies of society, grew with each subsequent meeting. Through the Colonel's influence, he had been elected one of the vice-presidents of the Commission; and, though he took no personal part in our investigations, he made several shrewd suggestions regarding the direction of the campaign. And he showed a surprising interest in our market operations.

All these things I reported faithfully to A, through Dodge; though I touched as lightly as possible on the Colonel's home life. Dodge informed me that A was well pleased with my work, but he wanted me to be more watchful of Kemble.

Accordingly, when Virginia came into the library late one afternoon, after having gone with Kemble to investigate a charity case, I took an unusual interest in what happened.

The poor girl had been crying so hard that her handkerchief was a wet rag, and the big tears were still rolling slowly down her white cheeks. Her eyes had a strange wild look, as if she were just recovering from the shock of some terror; and only her will kept her from a complete breakdown. With a great military oath the Colonel gathered her into his arms, scolding and petting her at the same time; and she was sobbing incoherently as I quietly left the room. Half an hour later I was recalled to the library.

Virginia was calmer, though her bosom still heaved with repressed sobs, and her big eyes were yet wide with that curious look. The Colonel was on his knees before the safe, shaking with nervousness and swearing softly at his inability to work the combination.

"Smith!" he sputtered. "Come open this —— door! It sticks like a mired gun!"

I opened the safe with an ease that increased his irritation, and looked up at him inquiringly.

"The money-box!" he snapped. "That fool Kemble has scared Virginia half to death by taking her to see a starving family, and she's got to have some money for them!"

Against my advice, the Colonel persisted in keeping a large amount of currency in

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this easily rifled safe. When, therefore, he counted out several one-thousand-dollar bank notes, I was astonished only at the amount Virginia thought necessary to prevent starvation.

Evidently the Colonel had a similar feeling.

"There, Jinny," he said tenderly. "There's five ones, as you asked. But it's too much to give in a lump, Jinny. Better let me look after them."

The girl shook her head shortly, as if they had already settled that point, and stood up with an air of relief.

"You're a dear, good papa," she said, putting her arms about him and kissing him with an attempt at brightness. "I'm sorry I gave you such a scare, but—it was dreadful."

"I'll give it to Kemble for this," he sputtered, while he caressed her. "I won't have him working my little girl into such a state."

"Don't blame Harry," she answered quickly. "He didn't mean to frighten me."

Then, evidently wishing to avoid further discussion, she kissed her father with pathetic tenderness and hurried from the room.

The door had hardly closed upon her when the Colonel burst into a furious damning of the absent Kemble; and for the first time I had a doubt whether the old soldier quite liked the thought of his partner as Virginia's husband. But he left me without giving me any further idea of what Virginia had told him.

Try as I would, I could not help connecting this mysterious affair with my equally mysterious first meeting with Virginia. It was absurd to suppose that the sight of human suffering should so have shaken the girl; she had seen harrowing distress before, as I knew from what I had heard of her charities.

I was about to take my worries home with me when Lucette, Virginia's maid, stole quietly into the room. She put her finger to her lips, and without a word offered me a little folded note. I opened it and read:

> If Mr. Smith will be good enough to remain in the library until seven, he will greatly oblige Miss Fairchild.

I nodded silent assent, and Lucette went as quietly as she had come. As I waited, my black doubts fell from me like a discarded cloak, and I thought only of the fact that I was to see Virginia alone, that her smiles and glances would be for me, her words for my ears only. I even hoped that she would come to me in tears, that I might venture to comfort her.

She came, instead, robed like a queen, and with royal bearing. She was as splendid and as little disturbed as a daughter of kings going to her coronation. It was the first time I had seen her in evening costume, and her beauty almost frightened me, it seemed to put her so far beyond my reach. I arose and bowed silently, waiting for her to indicate the terms upon which we met.

"It was good of you to wait, Mr. Smith." Her voice was as commonplace as her words. "I hoped that you would not object to carrying a message for me."

"I shall be honored."

She nodded easily, as if she had expected nothing else, and handed me a letter.

"If you could deliver it about nine this evening, I should be greatly obliged."

I bowed assent, glancing carelessly at the superscription of the envelope. I started slightly at what I read, and instinctively turned the letter over. The flap of the envelope was tightly sealed.

"I am honored," I repeated, meeting her eyes.

Apparently she read unintended sarcasm into my words, for she flushed a little and hastened to apologize.

"Please don't think the seal a reflection upon you, Mr. Smith. The letter may pass through several hands after it leaves yours, and I want to make sure it reaches the proper person unread."

"Your choice of me as a messenger proves your confidence in me," I assured her.

But she seemed determined to misunderstand me.

"Mr. Kemble suggested you," she said somewhat haughtily. "It seemed unwise to trust a gossiping servant."

Her attitude nettled me, and I ventured to show my resentment.

"I believe I have already proved my willingness to serve you without question."

"How?" she asked, in patient wonder.

"By keeping silence regarding our first meeting."

She knitted her brows for a moment, then gazed at me perplexedly.

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"I remember. You still believe I was on the Avenue that day?"

"I have had no reason to doubt my senses."

"But you doubt my word!" Her eyes flashed, and she extended an imperative hand. "I will find another messenger, Mr. Smith."

I slipped the letter into my pocket, and faced her smilingly.

"On the contrary, Miss Fairchild, you will permit me to prove my faith in you by delivering this letter."

For a moment, I thought she would refuse to employ me. But after a long stare she shrugged her shoulders with a little impatient laugh, and gave me her hand.

"You're an odd man, Mr. Smith; and, I'm afraid, inclined to be opinionated. But I thank you for what you think you have done, and for what I know you are about to do."

She gave me a graceful adieu, and went slowly from the room. I watched her as long as she was in sight, as I always did when I could without rudeness. Then I took her letter from my pocket and re-read its peculiar superscription.

The address was that of an obscure and none too reputable street. And where the name of the addressee should have been was a single letter, P.

III

"PLEASE, sir, won't you help a poor cripple?"

I glanced sharply at the suppliant. He was not the fellow whom I had seen ejected from Transom Court, as I had thought for a moment he might be. That mendicant had limped; this one had a bandaged hand hanging uselessly in a rope sling.

I shook my head at him, and hurried on toward the address of the letter that burned in my pocket. Tonight I was too full of my own troubles to care for his.

"I ain't had a bite today, so help me God!" whined the beggar, falling into step with me. "And I've got a poor sick wife at home——"

"And about sixteen children, I suppose," I interrupted.

"No, sir—only four," was the sulky response.

"And they're all cold and hungry and barefooted?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you have no money to pay the doctor or to buy medicine and little luxuries for your wife?"

"No, sir—not a cent."

The beggar was eager now; but he had overplayed the part. I had done the thing better myself, not so long ago; and, as an artist, I resented his attempt to sell me a cheap imitation of honest want.

"That's too old a gag, my man. You'll have to think up something better or go to work. Come, now, clear out or I'll call the police."

But the beggar shuffled along beside me, still persistent.

"For the love o' God, sir!" he whined.

"Oh, cut it out! You're a cheap fake. I'll bet you have more money in your pocket now than I have."

"I'll match you—blind bet—winner to take all," was the surprising retort.

"Gad!" I laughed. "You're a good sport, if you are a poor fakir!"

"You'll take me, then?"

"No, certainly not! I'll have you taken up, though, if you don't stop pestering me!"

The beggar sighed and fell back a stride.

"All right, boss—you're too sharp for me. I'll sneak up this alley and have a try in the next street."

"Better luck!"

I tossed the words over my shoulder carelessly, and strode on.

Something swift and strong rushed through the dark and flung itself upon me. A hand gripped my throat, another jammed a revolver into my ribs, and I felt myself forced backward into the dark alley. Then the beggar whispered, no longer beseeching, but stern and commanding:

"Stick up your hands and be quiet. If you make a peep, I'll blow your heart out."

I obeyed and awaited further orders. The beggar continued more politely, almost deprecatingly—

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mr. Smith—just keep your hands up and you'll be all right."

And he proceeded to search me, swiftly but thoroughly. The dirty bandage still hung in the rope sling, but it was empty. I began to grin ruefully into the darkness.

"So that's the game?" I whispered cautiously.

"Yes—keep your voice down."

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"Who put you on? The maid?"

"Never mind who; I got the right steer." He drew Virginia's letter from my pocket, and held it to the light to read the address. "That's the stuff," he muttered.

"Take everything else," I pleaded, "but leave me that."

"I'm not taking *anything* else! You savvy?" he retorted, returning to my pockets money and other possessions that he had brought to light in his hurried search.

"What will you take for that letter?"

"Rockefeller couldn't buy it," he answered shortly. "Now run along, Mr. Smith, and don't speak or look behind you till you've reached the corner. Then, if you'll take my tip, keep on going till you're home."

What else could I do? A man is a fool who rushes upon a loaded revolver in the hands of a "stick-up" man. I could not report the matter to the police for fear of bringing unpleasant notoriety upon Virginia. I could not even advise Virginia of my failure, and get a duplicate letter, because the Fairchilds were motoring that night to a country-club dance. Sick at heart, I followed the robber's taunting advice, sought Transom Court and took the elevator to my floor.

The night lamps in the corridor were dimmer than usual, and I fitted my key by touch and stepped wearily into the dark hall of my suite.

MY HAND instinctively found the electric button—and simultaneously I knew that I was not alone. In the absolute blackness of the little hall I could see nothing, strain my eyes as I would; nor did any sound of motion or breathing reach my alert ears; yet I knew, through that intuitive sense of danger, that some one was close at hand—drawing nearer, gathering for a spring.

I gave the electric button a vicious jab, and the lights flashed on with the startling suddenness of incandescents. I had a momentary glimpse of two masked faces, rushing toward me as if pouncing out of the darkness; then my head was bent back so sharply that my eyes swam, a strong hand stopped the breath in my throat, and a small cold ring of steel pressed upon my forehead and sent cold tickling shivers down my spine.

Eager hands went rapidly over my person and into my pockets, to the accompaniment of disappointed mutterings; then I was carried into the front room of the suite and plumped into my favorite easy chair. One man pulled down the shades and turned on the lights, while the other—he of the throat grip and the revolver—stood vigilant guard.

"All right, Z," said a not unpleasant voice; and I shivered with transient fear at the thought of what the use of the letter might portend.

My captor tightened his grip and bent over me.

"Promise to behave, and I'll let you up." His voice was utterly devoid of threat or anxiety. "Just wink your right eye twice."

Without ado I gave the required sign. The grip on my throat relaxed, the cold ring left my forehead, and the garroter stepped back.

"Thanks! I'm glad to see you're going to be sensible. I hope I didn't hurt you."

I wriggled my neck gingerly, with many a painful grimace, and managed to blurt out a denial. Meanwhile the one who had first spoken came forward with brandy and soda.

"Have a drink?" he asked not unkindly.

I nodded eager assent, and drank down the generous potion which he poured for me, before I thought on the possibility of its being drugged. Then the sudden fear and horror in my eyes betrayed my thoughts to the others, and both worthies burst out laughing.

"Nonsense, man!" said the one who had given the drink. "We don't use knock-out drops. That was as clean stuff as you ever put down. Feel better now?"

"I think so," I answered with an effort, surprised at the hoarseness of my own voice.

"That's right. You'll be all there in a minute." He turned to his companion. "Go ahead, Z—I'll stand watch in the door here."

"All right, K. Better douse that hall light, though." And Z seated himself comfortably before me.

I strove in vain to find any familiar note in either voice, or any distinguishing feature by which I might later identify them. Aside from their masks, they were very ordinary in appearance; and the masks were the ordinary black cambric affairs that can be bought for a dime at any toy shop.

"You understand," said Z—and just a

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hint of warning crept into his cool tones—"that if you start anything, you'll be sorry?"

"I do; and I'm not looking for trouble."

Z nodded approvingly.

"Where's your valet?"

"Out, apparently." I realized with a start that it was the first time that Dodge had failed to be waiting for me.

"When'll he be back?"

"I don't know—I expected to find him here."

"Lucky he took this for his night off," observed Z, and K echoed his quiet laugh.

I glanced quickly from one to the other.

"I wonder," I said slowly, "if you two really had a hand in that?"

They laughed again—this time mockingly.

"You might ask him," said Z. "Where's the letter?"

I looked at him stupidly, startled by the unexpected question.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Where's the letter?" he repeated with some irritation.

"What letter?" I questioned, to gain time; for, though I was bewildered by the strange coincidence, I knew very well what he meant.

Z's revolver had been lying idly on his knees, ready to his hand, but as mild in appearance as a revolver well could be; now it slid into his fist as if by its own volition, and turned its gaping mouth directly toward me.

"Speak up!" he commanded shortly. "We've come for that letter, and we'll get it, or——"

"But, my dear man!"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "Answer my questions, or keep your mouth shut. Come, frisk him, K. It must be on him somewhere."

K came obediently.

"Stand up!" he commanded. "Put your hands above your head, and keep them up." I silently obeyed both commands. "And don't squirm if I tickle you, or Z might get nervous."

"But I can't help it," I protested half angrily, as K slapped and prodded me about the ribs, and I wriggled under his fingers.

"Oh, shut up!" retorted Z, good-naturedly enough. "Don't keep butting in."

K removed nothing, disturbed nothing; but he examined every pocket, every seam, every fold in every garment that I wore, with a thoroughness that left no spot untried. It was a very disagreeable proceeding to me—and a very serious one to K, except when he found upon my suspender the special officer's badge given me by the Colonel and flipped it laughingly with his fingers.

"Take off your shoes," he commanded; and I complied, conscious that every motion was followed by two pairs of lynx eyes.

"Open your mouth," was the next order, and I permitted a long slim forefinger to search my cheeks. Only when every possible hiding-place had been explored did K show any sign of discouragement.

"Nothing doing," he announced. "What do you think of that?"

What Z thought was not pretty. Even he appeared ashamed of his profane outburst, for he took a turn about the room, as if to relieve his exasperation in a more becoming manner.

BUT neither K nor I heeded him. K had bent over me again, as if to make a final search of my garments. His long deft fingers silently passed a sealed envelope from his own breast pocket to mine, and—I take my solemn oath—he deliberately winked at me through his mask.

"Let's duck," said he to Z.

"May I say a word before you go?" I asked.

"If you've got anything to say," growled Z ungraciously.

"I've already been robbed of the letter."

Z pounced upon me furiously.

"Why the devil didn't you say so before?"

"You wouldn't let me," I retorted hotly.

"Then talk now—and talk fast."

I described the hold-up; and aided by the questions of K, who seemed to recognize the beggar, I gave them a fair description of him.

"What do you make of it?" Z turned to K, in his exasperation forgetting my presence. "I got the job from his own lips."

"In the shroud?" was K's curious question.

"Sure."

"There's a frame-up somewhere," decided K, "but that doesn't let us out."

The lights went out with a snap, and there was the quick soft rush of two bodies; then silence and the brooding dark.

For some minutes I crouched in my chair,

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fearing lest some careless move should bring the intruders at my throat again. Gradually, however, my bewildered brain insisted that I was alone and unwatched. I stretched myself warily, and heard no sound. I strained my eyes into the dark about me, and saw only the multi-colored flecks in my own staring eyeballs. I whispered guardedly:

"Z! K! Are you there?" But I had no answer.

Then I arose cautiously, with ears alert, groped my way to the wall, and turned on the lamps. The room leaped at me out of the darkness—but only the room.

There was no one there—nor in the hall—nor in the corridor without, as I discovered by a quick search. Neither, as I had half expected, did I find Dodge, bound and gagged, in some corner of the suite. Nor, except for the empty brandy glass and my bruised throat, was there any sign that my nocturnal visitors had come in the flesh at all.

Cautiously, almost fearfully, I drew from my breast pocket the envelope that K had secreted there. It was Virginia's letter to P, with the seal unbroken.

IV

I LOOKED at my watch. It was after ten o'clock, and my rendezvous had been for nine. However, I was determined to deliver the letter that night, if it were possible.

Knowing that my mission would take me into a bad neighborhood I judged it wise not to appear too prosperous. But I had no old clothes, and Dodge had got rid of my former rags. As a makeshift I discarded what little jewelry I wore, donned the worst-looking clothes I possessed, and endeavored to begrime and disarray them and my person until I could pass for a city loafer.

This done, I stepped into a taxicab and gave an address within a short walk of my destination. To my great satisfaction the driver was so impressed with my hurried disguise that he demanded his full fare before he would even start his engine. I paid it with apparent unwillingness from a scant handful of change, and was soon walking down Tulane Street, looking for No. 387.

The neighborhood, as I have said, bore no very good reputation. The streets were narrow, badly paved and poorly lighted. The buildings were a jumble of wretched tenements and cheap shops, with more than the usual percentage of saloons. The inhabitants of "the Strip," as it was called, were mostly honest but very poor; but as the Strip cut through the city like a running sore, it was infested by all varieties of criminals, who issued thence to seek their prey. To clean out the Strip was one of the objects of the Vice Commission.

No. 387 proved to be a small notion shop, with a stock of cheap tobacco tumbled in its dirty window. In common with most of the shops in the neighborhood, it had two or three living-rooms behind it; but these, too, had evidently been turned to account by the thrifty proprietor, for a flyspecked sign in the window advertised a pool table in the rear.

I did not enter immediately, but took a quick survey of its interior as I walked idly past the window. The front room was empty, and the door which led to the rear rooms was closed. It looked to be just what it pretended to be; and after fumbling in my pocket as a smoker does when he is hunting for his tobacco supply, I retraced my steps and pushed open the shop door.

A bell jangled shrilly over my head and gave me a momentary start. The sound summoned a middle-aged man, unkempt and dirty, but otherwise commonplace enough in appearance. He was in his shirt-sleeves and wore a greasy muslin cap advertising a notorious five-cent cigar; but as if to show that he relied less upon publicity than upon his own judgment, he puffed methodically upon a blackened cob pipe. He carried a billiard cue, and gave the impression of being much more eager to resume his game than to make a sale.

Through the door which he left open I had a good view of the pool-room. A partition had been pulled out to give the needed space, and filthy tatters of wall-paper still showed color enough to indicate that the two rooms had once been decorated to please contrasting tastes.

The pool table was the wreck usual in such places. The cloth showed several triangular tears; the pockets were mended with twine of several colors; and the wooden rail was corrugated with the burns of neglected cigars. Save for this table and a half dozen shaky chairs against the walls, the room was unfurnished. There was not

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even a cuspador, and the floor was vile. Yet it was hardly fouler than the air, which was thick with the smoke of cheap tobacco.

This small inferno held ten or a dozen men—all smoking industriously, most of them in their shirt sleeves, and all but one holding cues. They were city loafers, such as my disguise was supposed to imitate—hangers-on of cheap pool-rooms and disreputable saloons. In them viciousness was latent rather than active. They would not rob a man unless they found him drunk; but they would delight in taking pennies from an unprotected child.

The exception was a mean-eyed, cigarette-rolling youth, the best dressed of the shabby crew, who sat tilted back against the wall, applauding or gibing at the players with profane wit. Evidently he was of some consequence in his smoky world, for the others showed him a certain deference, and frequently appealed to him for advice. They were gambling on the game, and at nearly every shot some luckless player threw a coin on the cloth, amid the hoots of his companions.

But the man in the advertising cap was too impatient to permit me to gather these details at my leisure.

"Well?" he queried ungraciously, as he stepped behind his little case of notions.

"A package of smoking." I named a brand which I did not see in his limited stock.

"All out," he said, turning over his dusty wares. "Got any second choice?"

I glanced over his shoulder, as if to choose with care, and whispered in his ear—

"Is P here?"

"What you want of him?" he asked, as if my question were nothing out of common, and continued to display the tobacco packets.

"Him," I said curtly.

He gave me a look shrewder than I should have expected from him, nodded slightly, and walked back to the pool-room door.

"George!" he called. "Come see if you can find what this feller wants. My ball ain't down yet."

"Let George do it!" chorused the players, and the mean-eyed youth dropped his chair on to its front legs and rose to answer the call.

He was in no hurry, however. He waited to criticize the next shot and to make a side bet with the man in the cap before he lounged into the shop. But I noticed that he carefully closed the door upon the smoky inferno.

NOW that I saw him more clearly I thought that I could guess his profession. He had the evil face, the loose, sensual mouth, and the cheap jauntiness of men who live on the shame of women. It turned my stomach to think that I had come to such a thing with a message from the woman I admired.

"P?" I inquired, and he nodded.

"I have a letter for you."

"From the lady with the white feather?"

"Yes."

"You took your time getting here. I been waiting since nine."

"I was delayed."

"Well, let's have the stuff."

"How do I know you're P?"

"I'm telling you. Come! Fork over!"

He was getting ugly, and using the heckling tone he would have employed with a woman. It was nothing to him that I was big enough to give him the lesson in manners that his insolence invited. I was come on his business, and he treated me accordingly.

Whether he were really P I had no means of determining. I had been given no method of identifying him, or proving to Virginia that I had reached the right person. I had been asked to deliver the letter to P at the address given.

Without appearing to notice his insolence I gave him the letter. In his manner of receiving it I could detect neither eagerness nor satisfaction; but there was suspicion, for he turned the envelope over and carefully examined the seal.

"You'd better open it and see if it's all right," I suggested.

He nodded carelessly and ripped up the flap with his yellowed forefinger. As he did so he partly turned his back; but it was not to hide anything from me, for he beckoned me nearer with his head.

"Never know who may be rubbering in the window," he explained. "It's all here; see?" And he showed me a sheet of notepaper folded about five one-thousand-dollar bank-notes.

Blackmail, as I had feared! And Virginia had lied to her father to get the money.

I must have given some expression to my feelings, for P looked up sharply.

"Didn't you ever see so many bones in a

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bundle before?" he sneered, flipping up the edges of the notes to show his familiarity with them. "The ladies keep me lined with 'em."

"Any word to go back?" I asked, eager to get away before I lost control of myself.

He pushed the bills deep into an inside pocket, and for the first time looked at me squarely.

"No," he said, with a sneering smile twitching the corner of his mouth, "but I got a tip for you. Next time you come, don't doll yourself up like Sherlocko the Monk. The biggest bonehead of a copper in the Strip would tell you you'd spoiled good rags for nothing."

His slur on my disguise was a small thing, considering all that I had against him; but to my patience it was the last straw. He was quick to sense the change in my attitude, and backed away until his hand rested on the knob of the pool-room door.

I could have throttled him with ease and gusto, and been satisfied to make whatever reparation the law demanded. I could have had him arrested and probably have got him a long term in the penitentiary. But by so doing I should expose to the world the secret which Virginia was trying to protect. Blackmail is based upon something intangible—the esteem of others.

The scoundrel knew his power; he seemed almost to know my thoughts. After his first instinctive retreat he took his hand from the door-knob and leaned against the wall, blowing smoke from his nose and leering at me through the gray clouds.

"Better not try it," he advised quietly. "It won't do you nor her any good."

I turned on my heel without a word, jerked the outer door open with a riotous jangle and stamped down the street, with my clenched fists jammed into my coat pockets.

As I passed a dark doorway near the corner a man lurched out against me with a suddenness that nearly upset me. To keep from falling I clutched at him; but he wrenched himself free with a curse and hobbled quickly on ahead of me. Something in his gait struck me as vaguely familiar, and when he rounded the corner, the gaudy lights from the saloon showed me a bundle of shoestrings flying from his arm. I remembered him now! It was the crippled shoe-string beggar I had seen ejected from Transom Court. Had he been spying upon me, I wondered?

Dodge met me as soon as I opened the door to my suite, and took my hat and coat in his usual matter-of-fact way; though I thought I detected in his manner a contempt for my unsuccessful disguise.

"You're a fine chap," I stormed, "to go out without permission, and leave me to be held up in my own rooms!"

Dodge's eyes widened inquiringly.

"I'm very sorry, sir. I thought you had decided to spend the night at Colonel Fairchild's, and I ventured to go out. Were you annoyed, sir? And aren't you hoarse?"

"I was nearly throttled," I snapped, and told him how my apartment had been invaded.

But I said nothing of the errand upon which Virginia had sent me, nor of the theft and return of her letter. Indeed, I did not mention the beggar at all, and spent most of my breath in berating Dodge for not locking up properly. But he was firm in denying that he had been careless.

"Then you let them in," I retorted.

"I'm sorry you think that, sir."

"What else can I think? The rascals themselves hinted at it."

"Did you recognize them, sir?"

"No. And I doubt if I could identify them."

"I will report it to A, sir," he said, as if to dismiss the subject.

"And you can tell A for me," I stormed, "that I won't stand for that sort of thing. If it's necessary for him to stick me up, I want to be warned what to expect, or I'll make trouble. I could easily have got K's gun tonight."

"I wouldn't try it, sir, if I were you."

"I'll try it next time," I raged. "You tell A so."

"Certainly, sir. But I have an idea, Mr. Smith, that A didn't have a thing to do with anything that happened to you tonight."

V

KEMBLE sauntered into the library one afternoon with his usual cordial greeting to his partner and a curt nod to me.

"Harry," growled the Colonel, "they tell me you've made a big clean-up on Petroleum Central."

I stopped my work in astonishment.

The Railroad Pool, which the firm of Fairchild & Kemble was engineering, was

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not merely a traders' corner, but an attempt at outright purchase. The members of the Pool were for the most part men heavily interested in other roads, who needed the Petroleum Central to complete their control of the new oil fields. The Colonel's manipulations were designed only to keep the price of the stock at a reasonable figure until he could secure the shares necessary to give the Pool a majority holding.

The individual members of the Pool had pledges themseleves to keep out of the market; but some one, who seemed to know our most secret arrangements, was taking his profits in a way that seriously interfered with our plans. But I never suspected that the Colonel's junior partner might be our mysterious opponent.

Kemble gave me a glance which showed that he resented my hearing the accusation; but he answered quietly—

"Colonel, if any other man had said that, I should have told him he lied."

"So would I!" snapped the Colonel. "But what have you got to say to these?" And he slapped on the desk several copying-press duplicates proving that Kemble was plunging in Petroleum Central.

"I'd like to know what you paid for those."

"Twice the usual rate, because they gave me evidence against my partner," growled the old man.

Then he put his hand on Kemble's shoulder, and asked with husky tenderness—

"What made you do it, Harry?"

"It takes money to lead the social dance," laughed the other bitterly.

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"I'm already drawing more than my share out of the business."

"I'll give you a full half if you'll get into the harness with me."

Kemble shook his head.

"I appreciate that, Colonel, but I'm not a business man."

"You're not!" retorted the Colonel gruffly. "Your father would have starved before he'd take a cent of this money!" And the Colonel slapped his hand down on the incriminating papers.

"But why shouldn't I?" demanded Kemble. "I'm not a member of the Pool; I'm not even an active member of the firm. Why shouldn't I profit by stray bits of news that I pick up?"

I remembered his careful study of the Colonel's private papers the first day I had seen him, and wondered exactly what he included in his "stray bits of news." Perhaps the Colonel remembered, too, for he waxed angrier than before.

"It was dishonorable, sir! You *are* a member of the firm, and you used its secrets to your personal advantage. You betrayed a trust, sir! I want your promise not to touch Petroleum Central again!"

"I give you my word of honor, sir." And Kemble walked leisurely out of the library.

I knew by the truculent swing of his shoulders that he would never forgive the Colonel for exposing his dishonor before me, nor me for knowing it.

But the Colonel had never quite forgiven Kemble for taking Virginia to see the "starving family" for whom she had asked the money. He brought up the affair again and again, each time with some new sneer at Kemble as a lady's protector. Kemble asserted that he had accompanied Virginia at her request; that he had smoked and fretted while she investigated the case; and that she had finally come to him in the half-hysterical condition in which she had reached home. To his anxious questions she had answered positively that only the pitifulness of the case had upset her so badly; she had begged him to take her out of that horrible neighborhood; and, when they were near her home, had asked him to leave her.

I was sure that the Colonel had no suspicion of what had become of the five thousand. But the affair had worried Virginia—it was still worrying her; that was enough to set the Colonel against the one whom he held responsible.

Soon after Kemble left us Virginia came in, bringing the Colonel an odd-colored orchid for his buttonhole, and finding him irritable from the scene with his partner laid off her wraps and sat down at the piano. She was still there, playing softly the old-time songs that the Colonel loved, when Mrs. Fairchild sent an imperative summons to her husband; but she made no move to leave when he did.

It was the first moment we had been alone together since she had given me the letter for P—the second time that I had had the opportunity to speak to her freely. She sat with her face half turned to the light, swaying slightly to the rhythm of the music she

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made. I pushed aside my papers and gave my eyes their will with her.

The soft light brought out the purity and sweetness of her features, the ruddy glints in her hair, the faint blue shadows under her big eyes. Undoubtedly she was paler than when I had first seen her; there was a tiny pucker in her white forehead, and I thought the corner of her mouth trembled a little, as if in pity of some mental picture. But nowhere in her face could I find a sign of evil, of waywardness even, of anything that would justify my suspicions of her relations with the sneering Lothario of the cigar shop.

Impatiently I pushed back my chair and went over to the piano. She greeted me with a friendly nod and smile, but continued her music. I waited, silently asking permission to speak; but when she passed easily from one air into another, I ventured to break in on her musing.

"I wanted to tell you, Miss Fairchild, that I delivered your letter safely."

"Thank you," she said composedly. "It did not inconvenience you, I hope?"

"I had no trouble finding the address," I answered evasively. "And the man who received the letter claimed to be P."

She nodded her satisfaction, but did not look up.

"I happened to get a look at the contents——"

Her rigid fingers held the chord till it died away. Then she whirled about on the stool. Her face had lost every particle of color; her great eyes were flashing through angry tears; and a tiny pulse throbbed jumpily in her neck.

"You opened it?" she demanded chokily.

"P showed me."

"I beg your pardon. It—it was safe, you said?"

"The money was all there—the five thousand dollars that you got from the Colonel."

She nodded and gulped down a sob; but I was relentless.

"P asked me, the next time I came——"

"The—next—time?" She rose to her feet all atremble, and looked at me wildly. "The—next—time?"

"Will there be a next time, Miss Fairchild?"

"No, no!" she wailed, hiding her face in her shaking fingers.

"Because if there is," I continued grimly, "I should prefer that you choose another messenger."

"What do you mean?"

"Women in your position don't send money to men like P for any good purpose."

"What right have you to criticize my actions, sir?"

"Every decent man has a right to try to protect a good woman from a moral leper."

SHE stamped her foot sharply on the polished floor and faced me in a pretty temper. There were no tears in her eyes now, no fear in her bearing. Her look was as fierce as any I had seen in the eyes of her quick-tempered father; her hands were clenched into little white fists, and her bosom shook with her passion.

"Mr. Smith," she said, "you presume too much upon your position here. I am accountable for my actions only to my father and myself. When I feel the need of your protection, I will ask it; until that time, you will cease to concern yourself with my little affairs. You have greater things to occupy your time and mind."

The rebuke was well merited, and I knew it. She would have been justified in going straight to her father and demanding that I be replaced by a man who would keep his place. But she was too sure of her own position to care whether I went or stayed; in her anger, she had quite forgotten the hold I had on her.

She turned to leave; but I could not let her go, feeling as she did.

"Oh, Miss Fairchild!" I said, and I think I put out my hands to her in appeal. "Can't you see that I am only trying to serve you—to help you out of your trouble?"

"I do not need your help," she answered; but her tone was less confident, less angry.

"You need a friend—one who will do your bidding without question, or hope of reward."

"Without question?" she repeated scornfully.

"Without question," I asserted stoutly. "The Queen can do no wrong."

She smiled at that, with a touch of her wonted sweetness. I think in the last few minutes she had learned something of my feeling toward her, and realized that though I might have been presumptuous in other matters I had made no attempt to force my love upon her.

"You're an odd man, Mr. Smith," she said laughing whimsically. "I think I told you that once before. I believe you mean

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to be kind; but you hurt me cruelly just now—and you made me very angry. Sometimes I think you go out of your way to make me angry."

"I was angry and hurt myself," I said.

She turned to the piano, and ran her fingers softly over the keys.

"I should like to be friends with you, Mr. Smith. I know my father regards you highly, and trusts you absolutely." How that cut me! "I should like to feel the same toward his friends, but—I must have trust in return."

"What can I do?" I asked helplessly.

She fingered another scale and did not look at me.

"Would you take another letter to P?"

I started half angrily.

"You said there would be no next time."

"I hope not—but I'm afraid."

"Then I'll go."

She turned to me then, smiling with dewy eyes, and gave me her hand.

"Thank you—friend."

Some one entered the room—a man, for I heard no rustle of skirts—and stopped just inside the door. I had quite forgotten where we were, how liable to intrusion, and what might be thought of our intimate position—forgotten everything but that I was for the moment alone with her. If it were the Colonel, he might well wonder why his busy secretary was so deeply engrossed with his beautiful daughter; he might even remember with suspicion my blundering reference to a previous acquaintance. I turned to face the man, half expecting to meet a storm of wrath; but instead I found Kemble frowning darkly at us.

I bowed and went slowly back to my desk, feeling that I owed no explanation to him. Virginia met his black look with even less apology.

"Were you looking for me, Harry?" she asked, gathering her wraps.

"No, though I am always glad to find you," he answered with stately courtesy. "I wanted a word with your father's secretary."

I felt my face burn at his insolent manner of putting us in our proper places, but I resented more his open rebuke to Virginia than his slur upon me. Yet I knew I should not help matters by showing my resentment, nor did Virginia need my championship.

"Then I will leave you with Mr. Smith," she said sweetly, with just the slightest accent on my name. "By the way, Mr. Smith, I meant to tell you—there will be no next time." And she left the room with a teasing laugh which I alone appreciated.

"What is she talking about?" asked Kemble uneasily.

"Miss Fairchild will explain, if she cares to have you know," I answered coolly.

At that he looked blacker than ever; but he would no more have lost his temper with me than with any other servant.

"Young man," he said quietly, "I think it is about time that we had an understanding. You seem to have a peculiar habit of mixing into my private affairs, and you have shown yourself in many little ways to be curiously interested in whatever interests me."

"I admit it, Mr. Kemble. I am beginning to believe that Fate meant us to be antagonists."

"Antagonism might exist between equals," he retorted coldly. "Between master and servant, it is mere insolence."

"You are not my master, Mr. Kemble," I shot back.

"I am the friend and partner of your master; it amounts to the same thing. Will you be so kind as to remember that in the future?"

"That rests with Fate," I returned with a flippancy that was perhaps uncalled for.

"I think you understand me, my man."

He left me as angry as if he had driven his elbow into my tender ribs. Why, I had the man in the hollow of my hand! If I closed my fingers, I should crush him to dust like a rotten nut—indeed, I could crush him by merely keeping silent.

For I was sure that more than one big raid on Petroleum Central, which the Colonel had debited against Kemble, had really been made by A on the information furnished by me. Now I had only to allow A to continue to block the Colonel's plans to bring about Kemble's ruin, for I well knew that the Colonel would not look beyond his partner for his opponent.

But I was not yet ready to break Kemble; and when my time came, I wanted him to know who had struck him down. I reported the Colonel's exposure of Kemble, and urged that A keep out of the market awhile, lest he should kill his golden goose by bringing me under suspicion. But I said nothing of my own little quarrel with Kemble.

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VI

DODGE was a "gentleman's gentleman" if there ever was one. From his bearing I should never have guessed that he remembered the day I had been turned over to him, ragged, dirty and hungry. He was always deferential, always watchful of my comfort.

Not once did he presume upon his position as A's representative. The occasional orders that he had for me were given in the most respectful manner. And though I was still positive that he was spying upon me, I no longer believed that he would be my executioner, if A so commanded. In fact, I had come to have a personal liking for my servant-master, and I believed he rather liked me.

Outside the Colonel's household I had not a friend in the city, and my peculiar double life made it unwise for me to allow myself to be well known. At any moment I might be stripped of my assumed identity and left naked and ashamed; and the fewer there were who knew me, the fewer there would be to suspect me. But a young man must have some one to talk with, even if it is a servant whom he knows to be his master, and whom he suspects of being a criminal. Dodge was not unwilling to be companionable, after he was convinced that I would not attempt to pump him regarding A; but he would never talk of himself or of any subject that might give me a line on him.

When, therefore, I reached my apartment one evening, I was not altogether surprised by Dodge's inquiring if I would care to go out with him that night.

"Where?" I asked not without curiosity; for I had often wondered where Dodge went during his mysterious absences.

"I am not permitted to say, sir."

"Oh!" said I, understanding that I was receiving a command. "Yes, I'll go."

"It need not be tonight, sir."

"It might as well be."

I reached for my hat and coat, of which he had relieved me; but he stopped me.

"If you please, sir, we should be less conspicuous if we looked less respectable. I have laid out your things for you, if you don't mind. They're clean inside, sir, whatever they are on the outside."

I was glad he had told me that, for I should not have guessed it. The clothes were not very ragged, but they were unspeakably foul. It was just such a filthy rig as is worn by nine out of ten of the men who line the curb in front of misnamed "Workingmen's Exchanges."

Dodge, equally disreputable of attire, looked me over carefully and nodded his satisfaction.

"How about my face?" I asked. "You can't disguise this beard."

In answer he fitted about my head and chin a great padded bandage, which so swathed my face that I was very effectually veiled. But when I looked in the glass I revolted.

"It's all right, sir," Dodge assured me. "I've fumigated it thoroughly, and I'll guarantee it's as harmless as a clean handkerchief."

"Very well," I agreed sulkily. "What's supposed to be the matter with me?"

"A carbuncle, sir—very bad. You can't overdo the ugly part."

He whipped off the bandage and thrust it into my pocket, rumpled my hair, and matted it with some dirty-looking stuff and skilfully laid a diversified coating of grime over my face and hands. Then he gave his attention to his own appearance, laying in great blue hollows down his pallid cheek and neck and under the grime of his hands.

"A consumptive, by Jove!" I cried, watching admiringly the speed and sureness with which he worked.

Without seeming to pause in his making-up he put one hand to his mouth and coughed the hollow, rattling, metallic cough of a wretch whose lungs are far gone with disease.

"You're a wonder!" I exclaimed. "You should have been an actor, Dodge, or an artist."

"Thank you, sir." He finished his make-up by knotting a dirty handkerchief about his neck, and absently wiping his nose on its ragged border. "Put these in your trousers pocket, if you please, sir," he said, giving me a dime, two nickels and six pennies. "And if you're asked how much money you have, count it out where every one can see. You'll remember, sir?"

A taxicab was waiting at the door, with the engine purring. Beside it, as if in conversation with the cabby, was the crippled seller of shoe-strings whom I had come to suspect of a peculiar interest in my affairs.

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At sight of us he hobbled forward, displaying his wares and whining out a plea for help; but when I shouldered carelessly past him he broke into his usual cursing, and limped slowly down the street, keeping an eye on us.

As soon as we had entered, the chauffeur hurried us away in the general direction of the Strip. We utilized the journey in completing our disguises while Dodge spoke a deprecatory word of warning.

"You understand, Mr. Smith, that we are under orders. I shall have to ask you to treat me as an equal, sir, and to allow me to treat you as one."

"That won't be hard, Dodge."

"Thank you, sir. If any one speaks to you, just mumble; if I want you to answer them, I'll say, 'Why don't you speak up?' But don't forget to count out the twenty-six cents if you're asked."

The cab turned a short corner and rolled slowly through a pitch-dark alley. While it was still in motion we slipped out on either side, struck down an intercepting alley and turned into one of the worst streets in the Strip.

"Put your hands in your pockets and shuffle your feet," whispered Dodge. "And keep your eye on me."

With the nightfall a fog had come from the river, wrapping the city in its damp muffling folds. Here in the narrow streets of the Strip we could not see clearly our own length ahead. The scattered street-lamps were mere watery blurs; the blazing saloon windows were bigger blurs, through which stole shadowy gray shapes, as if the dead were walking.

I was completely lost; but Dodge plodded on without a falter. We passed through the yellow haze in front of one of the largest saloons, turned the corner, and went through the "Family Entrance" into the rear of the bar-room.

Close to the entrance was a huge pot-bellied stove, radiant with heat. We edged in behind it and stood holding our hands to the warmth, shivering as if the fog had got into our bones. Neither of us cared to take meat or drink in that place if we could avoid it.

Three arc-lamps poured their light over the room, rattling their carbons determinedly as the eddying smoke rolled up to fog them. The cleaner fog of the river had also invaded the room, setting a shiny moisture on everything it touched, and augmenting with each swing of the double-valved door that screened the front entrance.

It was a big, bare place, dilapidated and dirty. Along one side ran a narrow bar, behind which murky mirrors shone dully through their shrouds of yellowed mosquito-netting. Down the floor in front of the bar was a foot-wide strip of coarse sawdust, which had been tracked about in fantastic patterns. At the end of the bar was set out the inevitable free lunch in the form of a dozen dishes of different viands, each less tempting than the other. The remainder of the room was given over to the stove and the usual tables and chairs.

AT THE front end of the bar some fifteen or twenty men formed a shifting, rioting group—some dealing poker hands for the drinks, shaking dice, or wrangling excitedly. At one end of the tables four hard-faced men quarreled noisily over their beer and cards; while a broken-eared bull pup, tied to the leg of his master's chair, whined and tugged in his efforts to reach a discarded sausage end.

The bartender, an enormous creature, was in his undershirt, with a great white apron covering his ample front. He waddled up and down his narrow domain with a surprising quickness that left no call unanswered, and still kept a watchful eye on the free lunch. He had had his eyes on us ever since we entered, and had observed that we made no move to pay for the comforts that we were enjoying.

"Hi, you!" he bellowed, shaking his towel at us. "Drift along! It ain't right to spend all your roll in one place."

But, instead of "drifting," as I hoped he would do, Dodge pushed me toward the bar.

"You'll buy the beer," he growled. "It's your turn." And I knew it was time for me to display my money.

We shuffled up to the bar, making a quick raid on the free lunch in passing and leaned against the end of the sloppy rail, apart from the throng. The bartender waddled up to us, and made new streaks on the bar with his wet towel.

"What's yours?" he growled.

"A beer with a low collar," said Dodge, and I nodded a repetition of his order.

"Who pays?" demanded the barkeeper, resting his fat hand on the beer spigot.

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"Him," said Dodge, jerking his head toward me.

"How much money you got?"

I fished my little hoard of coins out of my pocket and counted them slowly upon the wet bar. The fat man counted them after me, pushing the coins about with his pudgy forefinger, until he had the six pennies grouped together in a rude little hexagon, centered on the dime.

"Twenty-six, ain't it?" asked Dodge.

"Twenty-six, correct!" he announced, pulling the two nickels toward him and carefully filling us two brimming glasses of beer. "What's ailing your face, bo?"

"Carbuncle," Dodge asnwered for me. "Don't talk to him. He's so sore he'll bite."

The fat man laughed and waved his hand hospitably toward the red-hot stove.

"Set down over there and keep it warm." And he waddled back to serve the noisy crowd in front.

We carried our glasses over to the table by the stove, where Dodge seated me against the wall, in a shadow; but he sat where he could watch either door. I hadn't the slightest idea for what we were waiting, or how long we should keep vigil; and I didn't care. The heat of the stove and the heavy devitalized air of the room made me sleepy. I tipped my chair back against the wall, caught my heels on the front rung, and dozed peacefully off.

I awakened with a start to find Dodge shaking me.

"Careful!" he whispered in my ear; and it was well he did, for I had slept long enough to find my surroundings strange.

"Know where you are?" he asked, and when I nodded assent he slid back into his chair.

I glanced down the augmented line of drinkers, started, and leaned forward for a better view. One of the newcomers had an empty bandage slung from his neck by a bit of rope.

"Who is it?" whispered Dodge in my ear.

"The beggar who held me up," I answered before I thought.

Dodge nodded his satisfaction.

"Keep your eye on him," he muttered, "but don't stare so. I'll get some more beer."

He pushed roughly through the group of card players to reach the fat barkeeper, and in his haste knocked several cards to the nasty floor. The players set upon him angrily, pushing and cursing him; but the fat man, pounding the bar with a bung starter, warned them that he wouldn't stand for no scrapping in his joint.

"Aw, cut it!" said Dodge, good-naturedly pushing aside a threatening fist and spinning a silver dollar on the bar. "Jest to show what kind of a sport I am I'll set 'em up for the bunch, and stand you a new deck."

The players received his olive branch with glee, and insisted that he join the game; but Dodge was obdurate.

"I got a sick friend over by the stove—got a carbuncle big as that dollar. I gotta look after him. Your deal," he suggested, pushing the new deck over to the beggar, and came back to me with two brimming schooners.

The beggar broke open the package, shuffled the cards thoroughly and passed them to his neighbor to cut. As he dealt them, face up, a growing hush fell upon the noisy crew, and they leaned closer together, watching each card as it fell from the dealer's hand.

AS HE dealt the fourth card to himself the fat bartender caught his hand, while the others edged uneasily away and swore under their breath. The beggar, for the first time conscious that something was wrong, bent over to study his cards; but the bartender saved him the trouble.

"Look!" he cried, indicating each card with his pudgy forefinger. "Jack of spades, eight of spades; jack of clubs, eight of clubs—two jacks and two eights, all black! Bo, you've dealt yourself the death hand!"

As if at a signal the screen doors swung noiselessly open, showing two black-masked figures looming big against the white mist that filled the street. Without a word they opened fire on the beggar, pouring into him at that short range the contents of two magazine revolvers. Then, as quietly as they had come, they swung the screen door together, and faded back into the mist.

Dodge caught my arm and pushed me toward the "Family Entrance."

"Duck!" he ordered; but I got a fleeting picture of the sordid scene before the door closed behind us.

The habitués of the place were following the murderers in a frenzied scramble to escape before the police came, and the

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shreds of mist blowing in through the slamming doors mingled with the airy, evanescent streamers of the smokeless powder.

Behind the bar the fat man was cursing luridly over a stray shot that had cracked a big mirror clear across. Before the bar, with his face buried in the sodden sawdust, lay the dead man. A little rivulet of bright blood, the only clean thing in the place, ran away from him over the uneven floor. One of the players knelt beside the corpse, hurriedly searching its pockets, and swearing softly because he had dyed one hand crimson by thrusting it into the shattered breast.

When we were safe in my apartments Dodge carefully filled up my glass with seltzer, held a light for my cigar, and stood respectfully before me, once again the model servant.

"Dodge," I asked, "what did it all mean?"

"It was an execution, sir. The beggar disobeyed orders."

"How did you know he held me up?"

"I am not at liberty to say, sir."

"Then I wasn't taken to identify the victim?"

"No, sir—to show you the result of disobedience. I was to ask you, sir, what you intend to do about it."

It was exactly the question which I was asking myself. As a good citizen it was my duty to go straight to the police and offer my assistance in identifying the murderers. But was I a good citizen? And did I know who had done the deed? Dodge, the fat barkeeper and some of the players were undoubtedly implicated; but none of them had pulled a trigger.

If I concerned myself in the matter, it probably meant an open break with A; very likely a fight to save my own life, which would prevent me from giving any help to Virginia or the Colonel. And why should I concern myself? The dead man had been a criminal; he had died at the hands of criminals. Until I had proof to bring the murder home to the man who really caused it I should be better advised to keep quiet.

"I shall do nothing, Dodge," I said shortly. "I can't see that it's any of my business." And I thought his face showed approval and satisfaction.

"Dodge," I added, "I'm getting sick of all this mystery and violence and underhanded work. Perhaps I'm getting afraid. What do you suppose A would take to release me?"

"Only one thing will release you, sir: his death—or yours."

VII

VIRGINIA'S cheeks were flushed from a walk in the crisp air but her eyes were troubled. Disappointed at not finding the Colonel, she moved restlessly about the room, betraying in many little ways her disturbance of mind.

Catching my eyes following her, she laughed apologetically and started toward the door.

"I'm bothering you," she said, "and you're always so busy."

"Never too busy to help a friend."

"I wonder if you could help me."

She went over to the fireplace, sank wearily into the deep ingle-seat and bent forward to stare into the whispering fire. It gave an intimate, homelike touch to our tête-à-tête that made my heart beat fast with longing.

"You promised to let me help you," I suggested somewhat bitterly, "but there's not much a poor secretary can do for a daughter of Colonel Fairchild."

"A poor secretary is none the less a man," she answered quietly; and I wondered if by any chance she, too, were thinking of Kemble.

It seemed to me that she and the brilliant leader were not as intimate as they had been. They had been less together of late; and though I did not believe that they had quarreled, I did think that she had taken offense at Kemble's assumption of proprietorship. But her next words showed me that my own desire had led me far off the scent.

"I am worried about my stepmother," she said musingly. "Something is troubling her. You haven't heard anything?"

"The Colonel never discusses family affairs with me," I answered truthfully.

"But you sometimes overhear things," she retorted, looking around at me with a meaning smile.

I smiled back, but shook my head; and she went on.

"I slept with mother last night, because father was away; and she tossed and dreamed and talked in her sleep all night long. Once she woke up crying, and in a nervous chill. Her talk was all about

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money—thousands of dollars; and what the Colonel would think of her. And—she mentioned Mr. Kemble several times."

I gave a startled exclamation, but she hurried on.

"You know how quick-tempered and jealous father is. I'm afraid mother may have played too high at bridge, and borrowed from Mr. Kemble. Father wouldn't like that."

"Wouldn't she have come to you first?"

"I'm afraid not. Mother and I have always been good friends; but I think she's a little jealous of me. Father and I seem to have so many interests that she can't share. I've told you this, Mr. Smith, because I thought you might know, if it is money trouble."

"Thank you for your confidence, Miss Fairchild. I will certainly let you know, if I learn anything."

"That sounds as if I had asked you to play spy," she laughed deprecatingly.

"I could play the rôle in a much less worthy cause," I answered, hoping that she would not detect the bitterness in my voice. "Weren't your mother and Mr. Kemble friends before her marriage?"

She looked up, startled.

"Yes. Why?"

"Your father is considerably older than his second wife——"

"You're hinting at something dreadful!"

"Pardon me; I didn't intend to. No one who sees them as intimately as I do could doubt that your father and mother are a very happy couple."

"I'm glad you feel that way, too. Some people seem to think that mother married for money, but I never believed it. A woman in love doesn't care what the world thinks."

"A man does—if it's the woman who is rich," I answered, knowing that I was venturing on dangerous ground.

She gave no sign that she took my words personally, but smiled frankly at me.

"If the man and woman are truly in love, I don't think it matters who has the money, or whether they have any at all."

"You might change your opinion, Miss Fairchild, if a poor man came a-wooing you; and I'm sure the Colonel would object. A man's success today is measured by his bank account."

She arose quickly, as if she felt that our confidences were becoming too personal; but she spoke with sober earnestness.

"You wrong us both, Mr. Smith. My father would never object to my marrying a man just because he was poor; and I should never consider poverty a bar to happiness if I found a man whom I could love and trust."

She left me in a divided state of mind. I was elated that she should have talked with me so frankly; but I was bitterly hurt that my false position made it impossible for me to think of winning her love. Much as I wanted her, I should make no move until I could come to her in my proper person, and with no stain on the name that I offered her.

But my greatest comfort was the belief that it was Mrs. Fairchild who was being blackmailed, and whom Virginia was trying to protect. I felt that her confidence had been given as much to explain her own conduct as to enlist my aid.

I WORKED later than usual that night. The Colonel's temporary absence from the city had doubled my cares; and my all too short talk with Virginia had taken time that I could ill spare. I do not know when I first became aware that an excited conversation was in progress in the adjoining room, and that I was in the position of an unintentional eavesdropper. But I was there to spy upon whatever might occur; and when I recognized one of the voices as Mrs. Fairchild's I had a double reason for listening.

The library and the reception-room were connected by a wide sliding door, which was usually closed and hidden on both sides by double portières. Ordinarily, no sound of voice could penetrate this barrier; but I discovered that the portières on my side were now pushed aside, and the door stood wide open, while the closely drawn curtains on the side of the reception-room quite concealed this fact.

I tiptoed to the door and leaned against the casing. But the voices, though excited, were kept low, and I could catch only an occasional word that meant nothing. I did make out that a man was commanding, and Mrs. Fairchild was pleading; and I heard the mention of money. I gathered that the quarrel had been going on for some time, and that Mrs. Fairchild was working herself into a tearful passion.

The unseen drama came to a sudden climax. The man spoke hurriedly and

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threateningly, but I could not catch his exact words; then, in a voice too muffled to carry far, Mrs. Fairchild began to cry hysterically:

"You cur! I could kill you for that! I could kill you for that!" And there was the sound of a struggle.

I swept the portières aside with a clash of brazen rings and stepped into the reception-room.

Mrs. Fairchild was in the arms of Harrison Kemble—so close in his embrace, in fact, that her face was held tight against his shoulder, and her struggles and cries alike were futile. Kemble was regarding her with a jeering, malicious smile.

At my sudden entrance he looked up and scowled, but still kept his hold on the woman.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

"I might ask the same."

My intrusion had caused Mrs. Fairchild to cower closer to Kemble, and I realized in a flash of comprehension that she had feared I might be the Colonel. Now she wrenched herself free and stood with heaving bosom, turning her flashing eyes from Kemble to me in mute defiance.

Kemble took a quick step toward me with fists clenched. For a moment I thought he meant to attack me; then I saw that his angry glance went past me into the library, now fully open to his view; and I surmised that he, too, feared that the Colonel might have returned opportunely.

"You sneaking spy!" he said with cold anger. "Haven't you yet learned to keep your place?"

"I think my place is here," I retorted stoutly. "Whatever concerns the honor of my employer concerns me."

Mrs. Fairchild started, and I thought she was about to appeal to me. Perhaps Kemble had the same thought; for he gave her a peculiar look and then turned to me with a quiet laugh.

"Oh! So that's it? Trust a servant for putting an evil construction on everything!" He included Mrs. Fairchild with me in a smile that I could not interpret as anything but malicious. "We'll be wiser to confide in him, madam, or he'll be spreading strange tales. Since you consider yourself one of the family, Mr. Smith, it may interest you to know that I was simply thanking Mrs. Fairchild, as a dutiful son-in-law, for her consenting to my marriage to Virginia."

I saw him grin at the start that I gave; but I had no care for him—I was sure that he was lying. I turned to Mrs. Fairchild with my unspoken question big in my face. My heart sank at her attitude; she was smiling approvingly at Kemble and patting into shape the stray tresses that his embrace had disordered.

"But you needn't have been so rough about it, Harry," she chided him gently. "I'm sure Mr. Smith must have thought you were hurting me."

"I did," I answered shortly, striving in vain to detect any sign of deceit in her smiling face.

"You haven't congratulated me," Kemble reminded me. "For one so zealous for the family's best interests, you are disappointing."

I looked him straight in the eyes, and put out a hand that I should have preferred to present as a fist.

"I do congratulate you, Mr. Kemble. But any man who can win Miss Fairchild's love needs no words to tell him that he is fortunate."

"Very prettily said," he smiled, gripping my hand with apparent heartiness. "I like to hear a man speak from his heart, whatever his position."

He turned on the complaisant Mrs. Fairchild, took her by the shoulders, and kissed her tenderly.

"You're too young and charming to call Mother," he said with easy gallantry, "but that is the title which our relations demand. I will speak to the Colonel at the first opportunity."

I studied Mrs. Fairchild for some sign of resentment; but she appeared to return his kiss in kind, and she looked after him with some gay sally on her lips.

I looked after him, too, with a hatred that came from the heart—all the deeper because I could see no way to strike him without also injuring Virginia. When the door had closed upon his careless smile, I turned to Mrs. Fairchild.

"I must apologize for my intrusion; but I thought you were in trouble."

"In trouble!" She turned to me a face white and drawn with terror, and put out two trembling hands. "Oh, Mr. Smith! Show me how to save Virginia from that dreadful man!"

The unexpected appeal startled and unnerved me. I hardly knew Mrs. Fairchild. She had always been kindly courteous to

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me, as she was to every one; but we had never got beyond the stage of exchanging formal greetings. I had thought her a spoiled, luxury-loving, somewhat frivolous old man's darling; and I suddenly discovered that I had supposed her incapable of any deep emotion.

Now I beheld her in a very different light; and her pitiful appeal, striking so near to my own desires, aroused in me a wish to help and comfort her. Yet I could not reconcile the present suppliant with the woman who had so skilfully helped Kemble to quiet my suspicions.

"I should like nothing better," I said shortly, "but you have already expressed your approval of their marriage."

"I had to," she gasped, striving valiantly to fight down her emotions. "You don't know what that man is capable of!"

"I know that I would give my life to save Miss Virginia—or you," I answered.

At that she burst into a fit of hysterical weeping, babbling incoherently of her husband, Kemble, and of some matter involving millions, of which I could make nothing.

What little experience I have had has shown me that a hysterical woman is only a frightened child, and is best treated as such. I took Mrs. Fairchild into my arms, soothing her, patting her hair, and tenderly demanding to know what troubled her. And she lay in my arms as a child might have done, sobbing convulsively, and seeming to gather strength from my calmness, and sympathy.

Upon this affecting scene, through the wide-open door from the library, stalked the Colonel.

I THINK I can honestly say that that was the only time in my life that I was afraid to look another man in the face. I knew that I was innocent—even with Mrs. Fairchild's heart beating against my own, and her warm soft body in my arms. I felt toward her nothing but pity, and a respectful desire to help her. But how should the Colonel know that?

He stopped just inside the door, with his eyes one blaze of anger and suspicion; while I, looking past the hidden face of his wife, tried to meet those eyes—and failed.

A great military oath came rumbling from his throat, and he sprang toward me. Instinctively I tried to free myself from the clinging woman and meet him like a man; but Mrs. Fairchild was quicker than either of us. She went from my arms to his like a child leaving a stranger for its mother, flung her arms about his neck and sobbed comfortably upon his breast.

Thus encumbered, the Colonel could not lay hands on me; but he continued to curse me with an earnestness and a virulence that proved his eagerness for more personal measures. With the surprising quickness that is symptomatic of hysteria, Mrs. Fairchild regained her self-control and put up a trembling hand to stop the Colonel's denunciation.

"Please, Victor! That's no language for your wife to hear. And you are cruelly unjust to Mr. Smith. He found me hysterical —you know how I have been of late—and he was trying to help me."

The Colonel glanced at me over her appealing face.

"I am waiting to hear from Mr. Smith."

"I have nothing to say. If you doubt your wife, you certainly won't believe me."

That got him, though it was a random shot on my part. He bent to kiss his wife, and whisper endearing words in her ear. Then he put out his hand to me, with a wry smile.

"I beg your pardon, John." It was the first time he had called me that, and I thrilled at the familiar term. "I beg both your pardons. This infernal temper of mine runs away with me."

His wife drew him close and breathed a sigh of deep relief, while I matched my strong grip against his own.

"Thank you, Colonel. I will tell you now, as man to man, that your confidence is not misplaced—in either of us."

Yet boldly as I said it, I had misgivings; for Mrs. Fairchild had not been frank with me, or with her husband.

Some time later I was alone in the library, busied in putting into the safe the more important of our papers. With a whisper of silken draperies Mrs. Fairchild came into the room and made straight for me.

"Mr. Smith, I want to thank you for your kindness. I hope sometime to be able to repay you."

I looked up at her from where I knelt before the safe.

"It was nothing, Mrs. Fairchild—no more than any gentleman would have done. But—if you really feel that you are in debt

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to me—tell me whether Kemble told the truth about his engagement to Miss Virginia."

She froze at that, and I knew that I had lost whatever hold I had obtained on her.

"You heard Mr. Kemble's announcement, and my confirmation. I think that is all that concerns you."

It was a galling load I carried home that night. Virginia had been kind because she knew my feelings toward her, and had not the heart to tell me the truth. Mrs. Fairchild was somehow in Kemble's power and dared not oppose his marriage to Virginia, though she unquestionably disapproved of it. I was but a pawn on the board, to be sacrificed for a bigger piece. And the Colonel?

I certainly was sorry for the Colonel—and myself.

VIII

I WAS at breakfast the next morning when Dodge announced Kemble. I let the society leader wait until I had finished; and when I entered the living-room he stood in the bay window looking down into the street. He turned at my entrance and nodded a patronizing greeting; but he kept his position in the alcove.

"Smith," he began without preamble, "I should advise you to look for another position."

"I'm very well satisfied as I am," I answered coolly.

"So I have observed; but you are becoming a nuisance to members of the Colonel's family whose comfort is more to be considered than yours."

"If you mean yourself——"

"I do not mean myself." He paused to let me get the full significance of his words.

"The Colonel can have my resignation any time he wants it."

"The Colonel is too self-willed to accept advice, or he would have discharged you long ago."

"I am flattered by your interest in me."

"My interests are wholly in the feminine members of the Colonel's family. Is that clear enough?"

"You made it pretty plain yesterday," I answered dryly.

He flushed in spite of himself, and his eyes showed an angry glitter.

"I do not stoop twice to explain my actions to a servant," he said stiffly.

I knew then that I had the advantage of him. I had caught him in a compromising situation with Mrs. Fairchild; and he did not know that I had been similarly caught by the Colonel himself. I believed that he was acting solely on his own initiative; but I must be sure.

"Mr. Kemble," I said firmly, "I won't say that I don't understand your insinuations, for I'm not altogether a fool. But I do question your right to speak for any one but yourself."

"You question me?" he flared.

"I do. If the idea were not too absurd, I should say that you are jealous of me."

That got him, as I meant it should.

"Jealous? Of you?" he sneered, with a look in his eyes that was blighting. "Why, you poor fool, I have only to crook my finger to have you kicked into the street."

"Crook it, then. I dare you to!"

"Don't go too far," he warned me.

"I'll give you the same advice," I retorted. "I am Colonel Fairchild's secretary, not yours; and I intend to remain his secretary until the Colonel himself tells me to go. If you are so anxious to get me out of your way, you will get quicker action by going straight to the Colonel."

He turned from me and stared down into the street, speechless with anger; and I knew that he did not dare to accept my challenge. I looked at my watch and added bruskly:

"You've made me late. Dodge will let you out when you're ready."

He faced about with his lips drawn back in a snarling smile.

"Thanks! But I won't wait to be put out by a servant's servant."

I knew that he planned war against me; but I felt that in this preliminary skirmish I had had all the better of it. His undoubted jealousy gave me new hope, for if Virginia had actually accepted him I did not believe that he would have troubled himself further about me. And the fact that he had so openly showed his enmity was all in my favor. It put me on my guard and prepared me to be ready for any stroke in the dark.

The Colonel and I were working in the library that afternoon when Briggs entered with a scrap of soiled paper on his tray. Briggs's bearing was that of a man performing a most distasteful duty; but he had positive orders to deliver any message or communication, however queer. In the work

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of the Vice Commission all was fish that fell into the Colonel's net, and he was spreading his nets wide.

"What's this?" snapped the Colonel. "Where did it come from?"

"A crippled beggar, sir—a shoe-string peddler. He said it was to be delivered only to you."

A crippled beggar! I started, and wondered how this unusual communication might concern me.

"He's gone, I suppose?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. He said there was no answer, sir," and Briggs took his offended dignity out of the room.

The Colonel unfolded the greasy paper, and read it at a glance.

"Humph!" he said with the emphasis usually reserved for stronger comment. "Read that, Smith!"

I read the scrawl as quickly as the Colonel had done, but my comment came more slowly. For this was what met my eyes:

COLONEL FAIRCHILD:

You've got a crook in your own home bigger than them your —— Vice Commission is after. Ask your man, Smith, what he was doing in disguise in Harley's Tulane Street pool-room the other night. Watch your own women folks, and beware of snakes in the grass. X.

I looked up to find the Colonel's keen eyes watching me sharply, though there was a dry smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"Well?" he asked quietly; and I knew from his tone that he took the matter with some seriousness.

I must have met his eyes unflinchingly, for I saw the smile soften into a more pleasant expression; but inwardly I was in a momentary panic lest I should inadvertently betray Virginia's connection with my errand in the Strip.

"It's half the truth, Colonel," I said, as easily as I could for my pounding heart. "I was in Tulane Street, and I did step into a pool-room to get some tobacco; but I didn't notice the name of the place."

"What were you doing in the Strip—in disguise?"

"Looking for evidence," I answered boldly, hoping that two half truths would make a whole.

"Did you discover anything?"

"I saw a lot of cheap bums in Harley's; and I ran across a crippled beggar who might be the one who left this note."

"Why didn't you say something about it?"

"What was there to tell?" I parried. "And—I was afraid you might forbid such excursions."

"I do! You're under orders, sir; and you're too valuable a secretary to have run into an ambush."

"Then you don't believe I'm a crook or a snake in the grass?"

"There's my answer!" He wrung my hand till the tears came, though not from pain. "We've worked together long enough for me to believe you in preference to a blackguard who's afraid to sign his name."

"Thank you, Colonel. I appreciate that more than you can know."

"Snakes in the grass!" he snapped, irritated by my evident emotion. "That's what I call an anonymous letter, —— 'em!" And he flipped the scrap of paper toward the open fire.

I caught his hand just in time.

"I'll keep this, Colonel, if you don't mind. We might hear from this fellow again."

"Like enough," he agreed. "Snakes in the grass!"

I WAS walking home that evening, as I often did when the weather was fine, when I realized that a beggar was keeping step with me and quietly endeavoring to attract my attention.

There was nothing surprising in that, for it seemed as if a plague of beggars had been sent upon me. I could not set foot outdoors without being followed by some wreck of humanity. Several of these fellows had constituted themselves regular clients. Others, of whom the crippled shoe-string peddler was the most frequent, were continually crossing my path without making any attempt to solicit alms. I was inclined to believe that I was the object of a regular espionage; and supposing that the spies were set by A, I usually tossed them a quarter and gave them no further thought.

But the present mendicant was a stranger. He offered some cheap lead-pencils as a blind to his appeal for charity; and instead of accepting my contribution and seeking a fresh victim he persisted in my actually making a purchase.

This fact in itself was enough to make me suspicious and cautious. I stopped directly under a flaming arc-lamp and bent over the pencils as if to select one.

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"Well, what do you want?" I asked softly.

"Will you meet me in Ryan's back room in half an hour?"

"What for?"

"Business! You aren't afraid are you?"

I might have had some reason to be, for Ryan's back-room had been the scene of several brutal murders. But I was not afraid, and I was curious; so finding that the beggar would say nothing further, I agreed to the rendezvous.

By his advice I took a devious stroll around the block and finally brought up at Ryan's back-room, where I found the beggar waiting. He greeted me with a surly nod, kicked a chair toward me, and hammered on the table with his empty beer-mug. A heavy-handed waiter responded with two full mugs, which he silently exchanged for the dime that I flipped across to him.

"Close the door," said the beggar, and I obeyed. "Now you want to understand, Mr. Smith, that you ain't dealing with me in this—I'm speaking for a man who's got the money to make good anything he promises."

"What's his name?"

"If he'd wanted you to know he'd be here himself."

"Well, what's yours, then?"

"Pete—'Pencil Pete,' they call me."

"Ever use a letter instead of a name?"

He stared at me blankly.

"What you mean?" he demanded with the uneasiness that a crook always shows when he comes upon something that he does not understand.

"Nothing," I said. "What's your proposition? I want to get home."

"How much will you take to give my man straight tips on Petroleum Central?"

It was my turn to be uneasy. Was this A's method of testing me? Or had the Colonel set a detective to try my honesty? Or was it, as Pete said, some third party who was willing to pay big for inside information?

"Nothing doing," I answered curtly, and pushed back my chair. "Your man hasn't got money enough to buy me."

"Set down, and don't get huffy," retorted the beggar, pushing me back into my seat. "Nobody wants you bad enough to buy you. This man just wants to hire you for a while."

"It can't be done," I said stubbornly.

The beggar leaned across the table and laid a grimy hand on my sleeve.

"Are you sure it ain't done right along, Mr. Smith?"

"I tell you there isn't money enough in the world to buy me!" I snapped.

"I haven't offered you money," was the surprising answer. "Supposing we agreed to get Kemble out of your way?"

"Who the devil are you anyhow?" I demanded, surprised and alarmed at his intimate knowledge of my affairs.

"I represent a man who always keeps his word," he responded meaningly. "What's the answer?"

"No—to any proposition that you have to make."

I kicked back my chair and started for the door, but the beggar barred my way.

"Not so fast. Think of Virginia——"

"Leave her name out of it," I snapped, growing more angry each second.

"Don't take that tone to me!" he snarled. "I know as well as you do that you took the job to steal the Colonel's daughter."

I reached for him, but at my first movement he had a revolver in his hand.

"Keep back," he advised quietly, grinning at me over his leveled weapon. "I wouldn't hesitate to shoot a man who would attack a poor beggar."

"You want to keep that gun handy then!" I retorted. "For I'm going to give you a good beating the first time I get my hands on you."

He laughed in my face and motioned toward the door with the revolver.

"Get out!" he snarled. "You're a bigger fool than I took you for."

I don't think I fear death any more than the ordinary healthy human animal, but I have always preferred to die full of years rather than full of lead. Therefore I obeyed the beggar's command without question; but as I went I cut another notch in my mental tally-stick against the day when I should begin to bring my enemies to a reckoning.

What Pencil Pete's proposition meant, I could not decide. He might have been sent by Kemble, but I could not believe that Kemble would have tried to reach me through a beggar.

The most reasonable supposition was that either A or the Colonel had wished to test me; and I believed my curt refusal would satisfy either of them.

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DODGE came to me after dinner with a peculiar air of reluctance.

"Some days ago, sir," he began, "you asked how you could get your release from A."

I started, and nodded eager assent.

"I told you what I supposed to be the truth, sir—that only his death or yours would release you. Now I am instructed to tell you that if you will induce Miss Fairchild to marry you under the name of John Smith, you will be allowed to keep any money that she may bring you, and be released from any further obligations to A."

I know that I should have been intensely angry at this astounding proposition. Dodge evidently expected an outburst. He kept a sharp eye on me. But instead I laughed. It struck me as exceedingly funny that I should be offered a big bribe to marry the girl whom I dearly loved—and should be unable to accept.

"That is not an order?" I laughed.

"No, sir; only a suggestion."

"It's a very pretty scheme. A marriage under an assumed name is no marriage at all, so Miss Fairchild would have neither name nor husband. The Colonel would undoubtedly pay well for his daughter, under such circumstances; but I have a very strong idea that he would be more apt to shoot me than to pension me."

"You are declining, sir?"

"I'm thinking out loud. Yes, A's a very clever man—but this time he has overreached himself. If I had ever considered such a marriage I should reconsider now."

"So I told A, sir."

"You did?" I exclaimed, startled both at Dodge's sure judgment of me and at his volunteering the statement.

"Yes, sir."

"Did A say why he desired this marriage?"

"I am not at liberty to say, sir."

"But you know?"

Dodge hesitated, and I felt that he would have liked to speak plainly; but he answered—

"I think I can guess, sir."

"That's more than I can do."

"Your answer, sir?"

"Dodge, was this marriage part of the original purpose in getting me in as the Colonel's secretary?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Won't you make another guess?"

Again Dodge hesitated before he spoke.

"I'd rather not, sir."

"I've been told that it was."

"By whom, sir?" asked Dodge, with unusual interest.

I related the proposition of Pencil Pete, and Dodge listened with a puzzled look.

"I don't understand it, sir," was his only comment. "But I'll report it. And your answer, sir, if you please?"

"I'll say for your benefit, Dodge, that I have no reason to believe that I could induce Miss Fairchild to marry me. And when I do marry, I intend that it shall be in my own name and person."

"You wish me to report that to A, sir?"

"No. You can tell him, with my compliments, to go plumb to the devil!"

IX

COLONEL FAIRCHILD replaced the telephone receiver and stared across the big desk with a frown between his eyes.

"Some one is after Petroleum Central again," he announced. "Everts reports a point and a half drop in the last hour."

"Going down to the office?" I asked, though I knew in advance what his answer would be.

"No!" he snapped. "If Everts can't handle a little flurry, I'll get a man who can!"

The Colonel's position, both in his firm and in the Commission, was that of a general commanding, rather than of a company officer on the firing-line. A private wire direct to his brokerage office brought him regular reports from his manager and enabled him to issue his orders as surely as if he were on the spot. He would not have a ticker in the library, because it made him nervous.

His work on the Vice Commission, during the time that I was with him, was chiefly that of laying plans and providing ammunition for an extensive campaign later. We spent long days over reports and statistics, purposely keeping out of the more active work in order that we might get a proper perspective on things. Only occasionally, when such work palled or somebody blundered, did the Colonel rush to the front and lead the charge in person.

But on this particular morning it began to look as if the Colonel would have to take

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the field. Everts continued to report raids upon Petroleum Central; and finally he stationed a clerk at the office end of the private wire to report the changing record of the tape. We in the library put by all other matters and gave our entire attention to the control of our pet stock.

The Colonel was at his best in a time like this, but he was in no mood for trifling. Virginia opened the door, saw her father roaring away into the telephone, made a shocked face at what she overheard and fled. But Mrs. Fairchild, who entered a little later, evidently came on serious business. She knew better than to interrupt her husband; but she came over to the desk and stood waiting for him to finish.

I noticed that she was excited and nervous, but I was too busy to give her much thought. I had observed that she was in a peculiar state of mind every time I had seen her lately; and I had come to believe that she was in constant fear of something. Since the day hysteria had thrown her into my arms we had exchanged only the most formal greetings, and I felt that she avoided me.

Imagine my surprise, then, when she bent over me and whispered with eager friendliness—

"How is the market going, Mr. Smith?"

"Down," I answered curtly; for I really had no time for conversation.

"Good!" she exclaimed; and I glanced up, startled, to find her face glowing with joy and relief.

She must have spoken louder than she knew, for the Colonel shoved the telephone across to me and rose to meet her. His eyes were blazing under lowered brows, and his voice was sharp and cold.

"Good?" he echoed. "I didn't know that you were interested in the market, Mrs. Fairchild."

"I—I'm not," she stammered.

"Then why do you say 'good' when it continues to sag, in spite of all I can do to keep it up?"

Her hands fluttered aimlessly at her throat, then went out to him as if she summoned his love to fight on her side. But the Colonel was not to be cozened. He took her fluttering hands in both his and held her tight, while he peered suspiciously into her frightened face.

"What is it, Eugenia?" he demanded, with a harshness that I had never heard him use toward her. "What are you hiding from me?"

"This is neither the time nor the place to explain," she pleaded, with a meaning glance in my direction.

"I can't leave the 'phone, and I can't spare Smith," returned the Colonel. "You've already told him too much—better let him hear the whole truth than suspect something worse."

She pleaded further, with gathering tears; but he was not to be refused. Finally she broke down and confessed with sobs and many evasions, while I at the 'phone, and the Colonel between her halting words, fought the oft-repeated battle for the control of Petroleum Central.

She had lost thousands at bridge—she hadn't meant to—but she had. She didn't dare tell him—he was so stern about such things—and so silly, since the money meant nothing to him. So she had gone to a broker she knew—and had sold Petroleum Central short—oh, thousands of shares, as he had advised her. But the stock kept going up—the broker was continually calling for more margin—she was getting in deeper and deeper—and now her husband would hate and despise her——

With that she went all to pieces and groveled sobbing at the Colonel's feet. He looked down at her with clenched hands and fiercely working face.

"My God!" he muttered, "First my partner, and then my wife! Is there no one I can trust?"

Mrs. Fairchild lifted a shaking hand to grip his fist, and raised her tear-stained face, beautiful even in its wo.

"Victor, dear! You'll let the market drop—just five points—for my sake?"

"How is it now, Smith?" the colonel snapped at me.

"Steadying, I think," I answered, and read him my last figures.

"Tell Everts to boost it — five points above where it started from! I'll teach these —— ladies' brokers to make my wife a thief!"

"A thief!" whispered Mrs. Fairchild, cowering under the double blow of his refusal and his accusation.

"What else can you call it?" he demanded hotly. "You've stolen my business secrets and my business honor! You were afraid to tell me you were in debt, but you dared to do what you knew would hurt me

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worse than giving you a few miserable dollars to pay your gambling friends! How long has this thing been going on?"

"Weeks," she murmured, so broken that she was pathetic.

"How much do you owe?"

She shook her head wearily.

"I can't tell."

"You mean you won't tell. Who's your broker?"

"I—I can't tell."

"Or you won't—which is it? How much stock are you carrying?"

She only shook her head and sobbed weakly into the crook of her arm.

"Come, Eugenia, I'm trying to help you. I'll pay your debts and take the stock deal off your hands; but I must know who's been putting you up to this."

"You're cruel!" she whispered. "Why can't you give me the money and let me keep that much secret? You're only trying to humiliate me."

The Colonel's face grew grimmer, and his voice more stern.

"Eugenia, you're giving me every reason to suspect there's something more in all this than you're telling. Have you been borrowing money from some man?"

Her quick negation rang true. He caught her by the shoulder and shook her sharply.

"Then tell me the truth! Give me the name of the man who got you into this!"

In response Mrs. Fairchild tottered to her feet, then fell limply, with a little tired gasp of failing breath. The Colonel caught her and carried her to the big divan before the fireplace.

"Call her maid!" he barked at me over his shoulder. "She's fainted!"

I rang for Briggs, snatched a decanter of brandy from the cellarette and ran to assist him.

"The market's on the jump," I said, hoping to relieve his mind on that point.

"—— the market!" he roared. "Where's that lazy maid?"

She came with all possible speed, and under her directions the Colonel and Briggs tenderly carried the still unconscious woman to her own apartments.

As they left, the Colonel looked back to bark:

"Call her doctor! And keep that stock jumping—tell Everts to take off the lid! I'll smash somebody for this!"

I HAD my suspicions regarding the identity of one man who would be hurt by the sky-rocketing of Petroleum Central that ensued, and I secretly complimented myself upon my perspicacity when Kemble came into the library. This was some time after Mrs. Fairchild had been left resting quietly under an opiate administered by the doctor, and the Colonel had returned to the fight.

There was no question that Kemble was disturbed, but his first words by no means justified my suspicions.

"Briggs tells me Mrs. Fairchild is ill," was his greeting, given with an air of anxious concern.

"Just a fainting spell," answered the Colonel. "She hasn't been well of late. Harry, have you been lending her money?"

"No. Why?"

"Did you know she had been selling short on our stock?"

"How should I know?"

"You shouldn't, of course; but somebody did, and I thought she might have gone to you."

"I hope she got out before you boosted it," said Kemble with an uneasy laugh. "You've got the whole street on the run, Colonel."

"Didn't hit you, did it?" demanded the Colonel suspiciously.

"No!" was the short retort. "I kept my promise, though I don't suppose you'll believe it."

"I'll know if you don't," was the answer, and it seemed to add to Kemble's disturbance.

"You might have let me in on it," he grumbled. "What's the reason for this sudden boost in the price?"

"Mrs. Fairchild asked me to drop it."

"What?"

The Colonel sprang to his feet and rested his clenched fists on the desk, while he glared across at his partner.

"There's some man behind it, Kemble, and she won't tell me his name. If I pound him hard enough I'll get him out of his hole. A man that will do a thing like that will think first of saving his own skin."

"I might almost think that you suspect me," said Kemble stiffly.

"I suspect everybody!" roared the Colonel. "You, and Smith, and every man my wife had ever spoken to. You can't tell me

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that Eugenia would act like this over a mere bridge debt."

"I can't tell you anything while you're in that mood," retorted Kemble with some heat. "But if you take my advice you'll look closer home. If I had ever found my wife in the arms of another man I shouldn't need to call in the police to help me catch the blackmailer!"

So Kemble had finally heard of that! I wondered who had told him. Certainly not the Colonel; almost as certainly, it could not have been Mrs. Fairchild; and I had told no one. Evidently the Colonel was as surprised as I, for he checked himself sharply and glanced in bewilderment from Kemble to me.

"What do you mean?" he asked at length.

"You know well enough. You betrayed it by your glance."

"Who told you?"

"Perhaps I was the only witness, and was about to defend the family honor when you appeared so opportunely."

"That's a lie," I said flatly.

Kemble turned his narrowed eyes upon me.

"You'll take that back," he said, between his teeth.

"I'll repeat it!" I retorted, rising to face him. "If you had been the witness, you'd have brought it up the other morning!"

Kemble started and looked confused.

"What's all this mystery about?" demanded the Colonel irritably. "Who told you, Kemble?"

Kemble gave me a wicked glance that I did not understand, and looked at the Colonel with a cool smile.

"I did lie, Colonel. I saw nothing of the sort—I didn't even know it had happened. But I did know the style of your precious secretary, and I took a chance."

Neat, wasn't it? It conveyed the impression that I was a practised home wrecker; and that, if I would do the thing once, I would do the same, and worse, at the first opportunity. I believed Kemble was lying again—that some one had spied upon us and carried the tale to him; but it made no difference whether he was telling the truth or not. He had scored his point.

The Colonel was impressed, and his faith in me was shaken; I could see that in the dumb question that his eyes asked of me. I was shaken myself, and almost alarmed at the ingenuity of this idle society man; but I was not going to give up without a fight.

"Colonel," I said gravely, "I'm not going to reply to one accusation—you have already given judgment in my favor on that point. Mr. Kemble and I have always rubbed each other the wrong way, as you know, and I don't altogether blame him for suspecting me. But when a man accuses me of blackmail he's got to bring stronger proof than what he himself admits to be a lie."

"That's a good argument," agreed the Colonel; but Kemble only repeated his wicked smile.

"And even if it were the truth," I continued more warmly, "it doesn't justify the charge of blackmail. Here's the best proof of my innocence." I shook the record of our fight for Petroleum Central in Kemble's face. "If I had wanted money, I didn't need to resort to blackmail. I could have swung the market my way right here under the Colonel's nose, and cleaned up a good pile before he suspected me."

"By ——, that's right!" cried the Colonel excitedly. "You'll have to take it back, Harry."

"You're the judge," answered Kemble easily. "If you're satisfied I am. And if I have wronged Mr. Smith, I beg his pardon. I should have realized what he has so cleverly shown us—that suspicions are only opinions, not facts."

A maid entered then to say that Mrs. Fairchild wished to see her husband, and the Colonel hurried away.

"I think, Mr. Kemble," I said dryly, when we were alone together, "that you are going to find it somewhat harder than you supposed to get me out of here."

Kemble shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"My dear young man, I haven't even begun to try. But if I were you I should begin to wonder how long even so obstinate a man as the Colonel will tolerate these little indiscretions on the part of a mere secretary. You'll excuse me now? I have an appointment with Miss Fairchild."

X

THE mulatto elevator boy was the first to discover it. Some instinct caused him to stop his cage at the fourth floor and look down the hall. Before the door of my suite was a suspicious something, imperfectly seen in the fading

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light. Half curious, half afraid, he stole down the carpeted corridor to investigate.

He found a man leaning against my door, face inward, as if trying to see through the solid panel; and his half aroused fear flashed into anger. He laid his hand on the shoulder nearest him with a sharp demand for an explanation. His action knocked the soft hat from the bowed head, and turned the silent figure about; and he looked into a white face streaked with red, and a pair of staring glassy eyes.

Terror loosened his grip, and the thing swayed toward him as if for support. He backed slowly away, never taking his eyes from those dead ones, lest the horror, unwatched, should spring upon his back. The thing seemed to follow him, bending its knees and swinging forward limp arms; then easily, with an odd little rustling sound, it slipped down the polished surface of the door and hid its fixed grin in the soft carpet.

With a hoarse yell of terror the mulatto fled to the elevator, dropped his cage to the ground floor and babbled his incoherent story over the telephone to the police.

Officers, reporters and curious idlers came on the run to Transom Court; my door was forced and my apartments invaded; but the suite was empty. A crippled beggar—an itinerant vender of shoe-strings — volunteered information regarding my probable whereabouts; and an officer was despatched to fetch me to the scene.

Although I was not told why I was wanted, I was glad when Colonel Fairchild insisted on accompanying me. I was still more glad when we reached Transom Court; for Captain Mullane, with the police instinct to accuse the man nearest at hand, would have arrested me forthwith had not the colonel interfered.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Mullane," he snapped. "Smith hasn't been out of my sight for the last three hours; and this man's blood isn't dry yet."

"The coroner'll want his evidence, anyhow," persisted Mullane sulkily.

"I'll be responsible for his appearance any time he's wanted."

Still accompanied by the Colonel, I climbed to the fourth floor and began an independent investigation; for I had a vague fear that Dodge might have got into trouble, and that through him I might be involved or even exposed.

The dead man still lay in a huddled heap before my door, guarded by two officers. I bent above the still form, not touching it, and carefully scrutinized my strange caller. He lay face downward, as I have said, a quiet heap of inanimate humanity; but his head had slipped a little sidewise, so that I had a fair view of his profile.

He appeared to be a man of about the average build, and some years short of middle age—dressed decently, but with a touch of flashiness that marked him for some species of the genus "sport." He was clean, both in clothing and person, but he was not wholesome-looking; the death pallor brought out in startling detail the swollen veins in his nose, and the dark bags of flesh beneath his eyes.

The back of his head, just at the base of the brain, had been beaten into a pulpy mass. It must have been a madman that killed him—some bloodthirsty brute that had gloried in beating out the last flicker of life.

"Know him?" asked the Colonel, who had breathlessly followed my examination.

"Never laid eyes on him," I answered truthfully. "Let's go inside and see what's become of Dodge."

But the Colonel laid a restraining hand on my arm, and pointed to the door of the suite.

"What do you make of that?" he asked, indicating a dark streak down the panel.

I looked, and marveled. Evidently the mulatto's story was true, for a stripe of blood, almost the color of the mahogany itself, ran down the middle of the door. It began just about where the head of the man must have rested as he seemed to try to look through the heavy panel. The Colonel swore softly.

"I've seen stricken men do queer things, Smith, but I never saw the like of this."

"He was set against my door after he was killed," I said, and stepped across the huddled form into the little entry hall.

The Colonel followed me, and looked about approvingly.

"Nice place you have here, Smith."

"My employer is very generous," I answered with a double meaning that was lost on him.

"Anything worth stealing?"

"Nothing worth dying for. Let's see if we can find any trace of Dodge."

But Dodge was nowhere to be found.

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The suite was in perfect order, barring what the police had disarranged, and there was nothing to indicate that Dodge had ever seen the murdered man. Indeed, I was soon convinced that my model man had most opportunely taken himself off on one of his mysterious missions. But that made the crime all the more perplexing; and remembering all that I had to fear from the suspicion thrown upon me, I was not a little uneasy.

I AM not going into the details of the coroner's inquest and the police investigation, except as they bear directly upon what followed.

Captain Mullane renewed his attempt to fix the crime upon me, but my alibi was too perfect; and the coroner, who was a personal friend of the Colonel, took occasion to rebuke the overzealous officer for trying to injure the reputation of an honest man.

But I did not get off without a scare, for the wily captain had an odd card up his blue sleeve. When he asked to submit the testimony of one "Limpy Joe," I wondered what he might be up to; but when he produced his man I was fairly startled.

This unexpected witness was my old acquaintance, the crippled shoe-string vendor whom I had encountered so often and so strangely. Being duly sworn, he deposed that he had been working his way down the Avenue that afternoon, a short time before the supposed hour of the murder, when he had been accosted by a stranger whom he positively identified as the dead man.

The stranger had asked him where Transom Court was; and, hopeful of a stray coin, Limpy Joe had accompanied him to the place. He solemnly swore that the man now dead had asked for John Smith, and had been taken to the fourth floor by the mulatto elevator boy; after which he, Limpy Joe, had gone about his business, the richer by a quarter. In corroboration he showed the "very identical quarter," which he was afraid to spend lest it bring him bad luck.

The mulatto vociferously denied the whole story. He had never seen the dead man till he found him leaning against Mr. Smith's door. He hadn't taken no one up to Mr. Smith's floor that afternoon; Mr. Smith was always out during the day, and he wouldn't take nobody up without first calling up his man and asking him about it. And he hadn't laid eyes on that no-account beggar since he kicked him out of the hall, some weeks ago.

Not illogically, I thought, the coroner dryly remarked that the beggar probably still recalled that kicking, and hoped in some way to direct suspicion to the mulatto; and the volunteer witness was once more thrown out of Transom Court, the poorer by a quarter which some one forgot to return to him. But I could not help feeling that his vindictiveness had really been directed against me; and I wondered how far his testimony would have gone if there had been any question of my ability to do the thing.

My second and greater fright came when the coroner, in his attempt to identify the victim, put into evidence the contents of his pockets. These consisted of a considerable sum of money, such small articles as a man usually carries, and a few papers. Most of the latter were of no consequence; but among them was a worn envelope with a ragged edge, which had been used for jotting down some memorandum. The notation was meaningless; but the face of the envelope bore a half obliterated superscription: "P, 387 Tulane St." It was the same envelope that had held the five one-thousand-dollar bank-notes that I had delivered for Virginia at Harley's tobacco-shop.

Fortunately for me, I had already sworn to my total ignorance of the identity of the dead man, and the coroner would entertain no further suspicion against me. He did not even ask me to examine the envelope; and as no one volunteered any information concerning it, it was turned over to the police. What their investigation led to appeared on the front pages of the newspapers under scare-heads for several days, and kept me in constant dread lest for once the police would get to the bottom of the mystery and find reason to connect me with it.

P, it proved, was a professional and notorious blackmailer. He had a record at detective headquarters, and a number of aliases; but no one seemed to know his real name or identity. As one of his aliases began with P, the use of the initial caused no particular comment.

Harley and the habitues of his pool-room were thoroughly sweated, but to no purpose. They knew P only as a good spender who occasionally received letters or visitors

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at the Tulane Street address. They admitted that others often acted for P, but they professed a total ignorance of the whereabouts of any of these go-betweens; and the name of "George" never passed their lips. For my part I believed that Harley was the only one of the gang that really knew anything; and he, I judged, was too shrewd for his questioners.

But the thing worried me tremendously. The superscription of the envelope was reproduced in all the papers, and sensation-seeking reporters paralleled it with samples of the handwriting of every person even remotely connected with the case. Luckily the writing was not Virginia's. The envelope had been given her already addressed. But for days I trembled every time I opened a paper lest I should find that she had somehow been connected with that fateful envelope.

Why Limpy Joe did not again volunteer information against me I could not imagine. I had no doubt now but that he had been spying upon me on the occasion of my visit to Tulane Street. That he knew of my connection with the envelope I had no reason to believe; but the mere statement that he had seen me leaving Harley's in disguise would have directed toward me a wave of suspicion that I should have found it hard to dodge. But Limpy Joe kept his knowledge to himself.

The police turned from me to my man; and I must admit that I myself was suspicious of Dodge, especially as his opportune disappearance was in itself almost a confession of guilt. But after the police had spent twenty-four hopeful hours searching the city Dodge walked calmly into their midst, told a perfectly straight story of his doings for the last three days, proved his statements without difficulty and resumed his usual mode of life as quietly as if an accusation of murder were an every-day occurrence with him.

IN SHORT, the killing of P proved to be one of the many mysteries too deep for the police to solve. But in some ways the thing hit me as hard as if the murder had been proved against me. In the first place, it estranged Virginia.

It may be imagined what a shock the whole affair was to her, especially when the newspapers were searching the city for a clue to the mysterious envelope. She lived in hourly fear of exposure, and was confined to her room for days. Even when she was about again, pale and listless, she assiduously avoided me; and I felt that it was from shame. The murder had shown her, more plainly than I had dared to do, to what she had exposed herself. I could not blame her for feeling as she did; but I felt that she was hardly fair to me who had been her unwilling but faithful instrument.

Whether Kemble had anything to do with her changed attitude, I did not know; certainly he was frank enough in expressing his views to the Colonel. He advanced the theory, in support of his previous accusation, that P and I were members of the same blackmailing gang, and that I had had P put out of the way for reasons best known to me.

I laughed in his face and let it go at that, for I knew what prompted his animosity; but he and the Colonel had hot words over it. I must admit that the Colonel's championship of me justified Kemble's sneers at his stubbornness. The Colonel would listen to nothing against me, though it is certainly a suspicious circumstance to find a notorious blackmailer dead at your door. But in spite of his loyalty I knew that the Colonel was secretly worried, and I realized that chance had put into Kemble's eager hand another means of undermining the Colonel's confidence in me.

Another thing kept the matter fresh in my memory, and this was perhaps the most curious of all.

On the night of the murder I sat late before my fire, trying to reach an understanding of it all. The body had been removed to the morgue; my broken door had been patched up; and of all the busy, morbid crowd that had invaded my privacy, only two remained. In the outer hall a policeman patrolled the corridor; in my tiny kitchen another officer dozed over the latest "extra" detailing the murder. They were waiting for Dodge.

My uninvited visitors had made free with my cigars, and I soon found that I had nothing to smoke. I was about to ring up a messenger to send for a fresh supply when I remembered the packet of tobacco that I had purchased of Harley. I was too abstracted to be overfastidious, and it struck me that it would be most fitting to light my reveries over the strange recurrence of the letter to P with the tobacco that had given

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me the excuse to enter Harley's shop. It was a queer fancy, I'll admit; but I was just in the mood to enjoy the idea.

After some search I found the ruined raincoat in a far corner of my closet; and in one of the side pockets was the packet, just where I had dropped it. But there was something else there—something smooth and round and cold, like a coin.

Still idly musing, I emptied the pocket and went back to my fire. As I remembered, I had given George the exact change; but to my surprise I discovered that it was no forgotten coin which I had found, but a token or pocket-piece of some sort. It was about the size and thickness of a quarter dollar, but of gunmetal instead of silver. On one side was the Greek letter Alpha, enameled deep in a bright scarlet; on the other side, in the same vivid enamel, was a Greek Omega.

I studied the thing curiously, but could make nothing of it. From its smoothness it had evidently been carried as a pocket piece; but, though I knew something of college Greek-letter societies and fraternal symbols, I could not recall having seen its like.

How it had come into my pocket was equally perplexing. The fact that I had found it with the tobacco meant nothing. When I am wearing an outer coat I frequently drop small coins into the pockets, rather than bother to put them further from thieving fingers. The token, as I have said, was just about the size and weight of a quarter. It would have been a simple matter for some one to give it to me in change, thinking it a quarter, and just as simple for me to accept it as such.

If the thing had had any intrinsic value, I should have taken measures to find its owner. As it was, I slipped it carelessly into my pocket, vaguely thinking that it made rather a unique pocket piece. Then I rolled myself a cigarette of Harley's tobacco, and sat smoking long into the night.

XI

TO MY surprise I heard nothing from A regarding the murder of P, and Dodge respectfully declined to discuss the matter. Naturally, I could not help wondering what connection there might be between these mysterious men who hid their real identities under the alias of a single letter; and I could not entirely free my mind of the idea that they were all working for the same end, though sometimes at cross purposes.

As yet the far-reaching investigations of the Vice Commission had uncovered no band of criminals that made use of letters of the alphabet. But that was not so strange, for with all the resources of money and organized law at our command we were progressing but slowly. Our every move was anticipated; often it was blocked before we could put it into effect. Unquestionably we were in combat with some mighty force, some gigantic combination of keen but lawless minds, that had cognizance of our very thoughts. It was not that the police were giving warning, for we used them only as blind tools; it was rather that some one deep in our secret counsels was constantly betraying us into the hands of our enemies.

Many of these failures I could attribute to the information which I continued to give A; but for some of the most discouraging and baffling I could not feel myself responsible. For I was beginning to "hold out" on A—a little hint here, or a big plan there—half trusting to my ability to lie out of any accusation of treachery, and half careless if I were caught. But some one with equal knowledge and less scruple was supplying whatever information I withheld.

I was not surprised, therefore, when the Colonel, enraged to speechlessness by the most recent miscarriage of our plans, announced his determination to take the field in person. And I was very glad that he asked me to accompany him, for I was heartily sick of spending my evenings over my dying hopes before a dying fire.

The Colonel's chief desire was to make a thorough investigation of the Soubrette. This was a flashy restaurant on the edge of the Strip, which ostensibly catered to the less respectable Bohemian element, but which we were convinced was really the resort of the utterly lawless and depraved. It was owned and conducted by one Jake Kroner, a ward politician of the worst type; and even the newspapers that supported the Commission were beginning to ask embarrassing questions regarding the apparently immunity of the Soubrette.

As a matter of fact, the Colonel had been after Jake Kroner from the beginning; but Kroner was a power in the city. As an

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alderman who had survived the reform wave, he had behind him the ousted gangs of both political parties, and—it was suspected—many men of better reputation who had found him useful in a business way.

And in spite of our efforts to get something on him he continued to defy us. Every raid we ordered on his place was tipped off in advance, and our agents found nothing on the premises for which we could hold him to the law. Yet we were sure that he habitually sold liquor after hours, and that gambling, robbery, and worse things were carried on in the upper rooms.

"But why go at this early hour?" I asked, when the Colonel announced his purpose. "Things don't begin to liven up till after midnight."

"I got a tip by 'phone," answered the Colonel evasively.

"How many officers do we want?"

"None!"

I whistled softly and grinned at him.

"You afraid?" he demanded.

I shook my head and laughed.

"Not I. But I was just thinking what they'll do to us."

"They won't do a thing—Kroner's too slick. He isn't looking to make a martyr of any one. No, sir! I'm going into that joint just as if I were a rounder with money to spend; and I'm going through it from basement to roof! You can come or not, just as you like."

"Oh, I'm coming," I laughed. "I wouldn't miss the fun for a good deal."

"I hope there will be some fun," growled the Colonel, selecting a heavy stick from the rack.

In spite of my advice the Colonel decided that we should walk; before we had gone many blocks he regretted his decision, for my customary retinue of beggars hung upon our flanks, making our progress almost triumphal.

"You shouldn't encourage them, Smith," growled the Colonel. "You know they're all humbugs."

"Not all," I said lightly, but with vivid recollections of the days when I had been dependent upon the foolish kindness of strangers. "Here's one that is, though; he's touched me for a quarter every day for a month."

"Turn him down," commanded the Colonel. "I won't stand for it. It isn't consistent with our position, Smith."

"I've just got a quarter left," I answered. "And this fellow's got such a way with him, I hate to refuse him."

The beggar sidled up to us, instinctively keeping out of reach of the Colonel's swinging cane, and began his usual plea. That was a peculiarity of his—in all the times that he had accosted me, he had never changed his patter. I slipped the quarter into his hand and gave him a word of cheer. He responded with his customary, "God keep you rich and generous, sir!" and sidled away, with a wary eye on the Colonel.

"Good thing you're out of change," mumbled my companion. "I'll give the next one something to remember us by."

I started at his words, and plunged my hand into my trousers pocket. It was empty, as I had said. A hasty search of my other pockets disclosed a similar lack of small change. The Colonel watched my actions with scornful glee.

"Needn't ask me for money," he ckuckled, "for I wouldn't lend you a cent."

"It isn't that!" I gasped, more troubled than the circumstance would seem to warrant; for I discovered that I had given away my Greek-lettered token by mistake.

I stopped and looked back, half mindful to retrace my steps, though I had no idea to which beggar I had given it. The thing had no intrinsic value, as I have said; but it had come to me on one night of mystery as the souvenir of another, and I had cherished a vague hope that it might eventually lead me to some clue.

The Colonel had stopped with me and followed my eyes. Now he broke out profanely.

"Look at that scoundrel! I do believe he's following us!"

The beggar whom we had just left was indeed coming our way, making energetic but mysterious signs to me. As he saw us waiting for him, he stopped, but continued to gesticulate earnestly.

"I'm going back to give him a lesson," announced the Colonel.

"Oh, nonsense!" I retorted, taking his arm and starting on again. "He's probably crazy—half of those fellows are." But I suspected that it was to him that I had inadvertently given my token.

I had no idea what message he was trying to wigwag to me, except that it was not

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hostile. Had I been alone I should certainly have gone back and offered him a bill in exchange for the worthless token; but the Colonel had worked himself into such a state that he was likely to carry out his threat of taking his stick to the fellow. But as I hurried the sputtering old soldier along I observed covertly that the beggar still followed us, and that he signaled to me every time I looked around.

There was a little crowd entering the ornate doorway of the Soubrette, and we halted in the shadow till the way should be clear. The Colonel had eyes only for the boisterous arrivals, to whom he was applying various disgusted epithets; but I looked anxiously back for the beggar.

The fellow stood close beside me, with his fingers on his lips and the other hand extended to me. In his open palm lay the Greek-lettered token.

I took it with a silent but eager nod of thanks and put my hand into my pocket, intending to reward him. But he shook his head sharply in negation, caught my hand, and gave six light finger taps on its back.

"What's up?" he whispered, so softly that it was hardly a breath.

I put my own finger to my own lips, and nodded toward the Colonel as if afraid to speak. In fact, if I had known what to say, I should not have dared try to emulate his almost soundless speech.

"Going in?" he asked, indicating the arched entrance to the Soubrette.

I nodded assent.

"Want me?"

I nodded again, not because I had any idea why I should want him but because he seemed to expect it.

The noisy crowd moved inside; the Colonel and I quietly fell in behind, and the beggar sidled silently after.

THE room was large, gaudily decorated and garishly lighted. At one end was a small semicircular stage, for the moment occupied by a "blackface" comedian shouting a vulgar song. About the three other sides of the room were small booths or stalls, built nearly to the ceiling, and provided with curtains in front so that they afforded a privacy forbidden by law to such places. The remaining floor space was set thick with small tables and their accompanying chairs. It was too early for the place to be crowded, but more than half the tables and stalls were taken.

At the first glance the guests appeared to be respectable citizens out for a mild good time; but on observing them more closely I saw that few of them had much claim to respectability. For the most part they were of the unclassed, both men and women; and though they made a considerable display of wealth, it were better not to inquire too closely into the source of their incomes. They were, in fact, as "shady" as the café—which offered food and drink of the best, and questioned neither the manners nor the morals of its patrons, so that they paid their scores.

Our entrance created a sensation. The Colonel was well known to the public through photograph and caricature, and his somewhat eccentric manner of wearing his hair and beard made him easy to recognize.

I think for a moment some of the people thought it was a joke—the masquerade of some sport looking for notoriety. There was a nervous laugh or two, and a general craning of necks in our direction. The singer faltered, then took up his song with a lack of his previous spirit. At a table near us a waiter exhausted his seltzer siphon into a glass already brimming. There was a flutter of apprehension and a stealthy pushing back of chairs, as if the occupants were preparing to escape.

I saw the Colonel stiffen, and followed his glance. Jake Kroner was coming toward us—eagerly, smilingly, with outstretched hand, as if greeting an old friend rather than joining battle with an ancient enemy. Kroner never was known to avoid a fight when fighting would gain his ends; but this time he used more subtle weapons than fists and life-preservers. He was no coward, but neither was he a fool.

"Glad to see you, Colonel! What can I do for you?"

"You can show me cause why I should not cancel your license," replied the Colonel, totally ignoring the outstretched hand.

Kroner took the rebuff and the challenge with equal good nature.

"Not according to law," he retorted meaningly. "You've got to have proof that I'm breaking the law—and I don't believe you've got it, Colonel."

"I'll have it before I leave."

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"Help yourself!" Kroner waved a hospitable hand about the place. "Send your men any where you like."

"I have no one with me but my secretary, Mr. Smith."

Kroner's eyes widened and he grinned upon me amiably enough.

"Mr. Smith looks pretty fit," he opined. "But you don't need a bodyguard here, Colonel. You're as safe as you are in your own library—and as harmless."

The last words were something more than a gratuitous insult; they were a blunt statement of the fact that we should gain nothing by our visit. I felt a curious admiration for this lawbreaker who so coolly defied us, and studied him with a new interest.

Alderman Kroner was naturally of a heavy build, and his face was somewhat gross through self-indulgence; but he was anything but an evil-looking fellow. His eye was clear, his color good, his hand steady, his whole bearing confident and masterful. He was dressed with a care that was almost foppish, and with some small personal peculiarities in the matter of color and style; for he was exceedingly jealous of his reputation as the best dresser in the circles which he adorned. In general he would have been taken for a wealthy, somewhat self-indulgent, but harmless clubman, and not for the gang leader, resort keeper, law breaker, three-time murderer that he was.

But such it was our mission to prove him. The Colonel lifted his stick and pointed to the stalls along the side of the room, several of which were completely curtained.

"There's all the evidence I want," he snapped.

"They're empty," said Kroner carelessly. "The curtains are just for ornament."

"No objection if I investigate?" sneered the Colonel.

"Go as far as you like," retorted the other; but he gave me a quick glance quite in contrast with his careless words.

He seemed to be trying to convey both warning and appeal; but the only idea that I received was that he dared not speak before the Colonel. I shrugged my shoulders noncommittally and followed the Colonel, holding myself in readiness for any surprise.

There were less than a dozen scattered stalls which had their curtains drawn. One or two of these had been hurriedly veiled at our entrance; but the others had been already private, and I was inclined to think their occupants knew nothing of our presence.

One in particular, in the far corner of the room, appeared to be really unoccupied. Yet by the arrangement of the booths it was especially adapted to privacy, since its only opening was a curtained doorway at the corner formed by the walls of the adjoining stalls; whereas the other compartments were open across the whole front, except when the curtains were drawn together.

The Colonel proceeded down the row of stalls under a running fire of sneers and curses, and I expected every minute to find myself fighting back to back with him. But Kroner went with us, smiling placidly, and repressing sharply any show of resistance on the part of his waiters or his guests. I thought he still tried to convey some message to me, but I could not interpret it. And I was equally at a loss to understand the antics of the beggar, who also was trying to give me important information.

Finally he sidled up to me, and whispered in that soundless voice of his:

"The corner stall! Keep him away!"

So that was the message that these two had been trying to get through my thick head! There was only one way to keep the Colonel from investigating every stall, and that was to search part of them myself. I knew he would trust my report.

"I'll take the other side, and get it over with," I said carelessly; and the Colonel nodded assent.

I went straight to the corner stall, quietly drew the curtain aside a little and looked in.

At the table sat three people, talking in tones so low that they had to put their heads together to hear. On the table was neither food nor drink; but there was a bundle of bank-notes which might have represented several thousand dollars. As I looked the woman finished a pleading tearful speech by pushing the notes across to one of the men.

This fellow was unknown to me; but the other man was my old friend and enemy, Kemble, and the woman was Virginia Fairchild.

I let the curtain fall without having betrayed my presence and turned to find

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Kroner and the beggar watching me keenly —almost anxiously.

Without a sign that I recognized their feeling, I went quickly down the remaining row of booths, and then returned to the Colonel to report.

"Nothing worth while here," I said, with a bored yawn. "Hadn't we better go upstairs?"

"Who's in that corner booth?" demanded the Colonel.

I turned to follow his pointing cane, as if to determine which corner he meant, and saw that Kroner was unostentatiously standing guard over the compartment in question.

"Oh, that? That's empty, Colonel."

XII

BUT though I had lied to the Colonel, and had failed to report to Dodge on my visit to the Soubrette, I couldn't lie to myself; nor could I get any least grain of comfort out of what I had seen. On the contrary, it brought back all my old fears and suspicions with redoubled force.

As Virginia had never sent me a second time into the Strip, I had come to hope that she had somehow satisfied the blackmailer with her first payment. And her revelations and my discoveries regarding Mrs. Fairchild had made me believe that she was trying to protect her mother rather than herself. Her terror at P's death I had ascribed chiefly to fear for her mother.

Now I saw recent events in a very different and less favorable light. Virginia had probably been paying tribute regularly through some other go-between; perhaps she had even dealt with P in person, and had been terrified lest her relations with him should be made public. Nor could I longer believe that she was acting as the protector of Mrs. Fairchild. As such she might logically send messages and money to the blackmailers; but she assuredly would not go to them in person and thereby put herself in their power unless she were indeed already in their toils, or—their accomplice.

The fact that Kemble had been acting as Viginia's escort increased my fears rather than allayed them. I knew that he was determined to marry her; but I did not believe that he would care by what means he won her, so long as no public scandal resulted. Apparently, from my brief glimpse of the scene at the Soubrette, he had been only an escort, and had as little liking as I for such things; but I could not forget the peculiar results attendant upon a previous visit that she had made under his protection, and I wondered if there really were any connection between the two.

What hurt me most, however, was my waving faith in Virginia. Argue and reason as I would, it seemed to me that I could put no other construction upon her mysterious actions.

As the surest way of bringing matters to a head I sent Virginia a line by Briggs, asking her if she would do me the favor of stopping in the library some time that day. The Colonel had been called to court for the afternoon, and I felt that I might not for some time have so favorable an opportunity to talk with her.

She responded almost at once, and I was both gratified and troubled to learn that she had canceled an engagement with her mother in order to comply with my request. That, and her evident uneasiness, put me on my guard.

"Some time ago," I began, "you asked me to help you discover what was troubling your mother; but I have not seen you often enough lately to keep you informed."

"I've been so busy," she began.

"That is one of the penalties of being engaged," I smiled.

"Engaged?" she repeated without embarrassment.

"I thought I had it on the best authority," I stammered.

She extended her fingers fan-like, to show me that no diamond adorned them.

"There is the best authority. Who told you?"

"Please don't ask. I see I've made another blunder."

"Then I'll tell you: it was mother and Mr. Kemble."

I gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"Oh, I know it," she continued; "they're telling everybody the same thing; and they're both doing their best to make it come true."

"You can't be very much displeased," I said bitterly, "or you'd soon put a stop to it."

"I don't know that I care much one way or the other," she responded pathetically. "But it seems to please them."

I moved restlessly about, not quite know-

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ing how to begin; and she watched me with a half smile of understanding.

"Miss Fairchild," I said at length, standing before her on the hearth rug, "I know that I have no right to say it; but I think Mr. Kemble should be more thoughtful of your reputation in taking you about."

She moistened her lips before she spoke.

"Go on," she said softly. "You can't stop there, you know."

"I saw you together at the Soubrette last night," I answered brutally.

The color faded out of her face, leaving it white and drawn; and into her eyes came that wide look of terror that I remembered so well. Then she recovered herself and rose to face me, while anger flooded her face with crimson.

"Are you trying to insult me?" she demanded.

"I am trying to warn you. A respectable woman has no business in the Soubrette, even with her husband."

"I never was in the place in my life!" she gasped. "And I think you're horrid!"

I shook my head sadly.

"You're only making me more certain, Miss Fairchild. You are too quick to deny —if you were innocent, your first question would have been why you shouldn't go there. You have betrayed the fact that you know."

"You—you mean to insist?"

"I saw you with my own eyes—you and Mr. Kemble and another man, to whom you were paying a big sum of money."

"You believe that?" she half sobbed. "Oh, what must you think of me?"

"I am trying to think the best," I assured her, "but confidence demands confidence, Miss Fairchild. You have never wholly trusted me."

She sank down into the ingle-seat and buried her face in her hands, sobbing softly. I ventured to lay a hand on her shoulder, and she did not resent it.

"Won't you let me help you? You promised me once that you would."

"I can't! There's nothing you could do! There's nothing to do! You are utterly mistaken, Mr. Smith."

I turned fom her, half angrily.

"I'm helpless if you take that tone," I agreed stiffly.

She put out a shaking hand, but did not touch me.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

FOR a moment I refused to accept her proffer of friendship; then my love mastered me. I caught her hand and kissed it passionately. I went on my knees and lifted my hungry arms toward her. Wide-eyed, startled, half angry, she shrank away from me.

"What do you mean?" she asked indignantly.

"I want you!" I responded hoarsely. "Do I need to tell you?"

"And I thought you were a gentleman!" she said with biting scorn. "I let you help me because you offered it yourself with no hope of reward. You accuse me of not trusting you—how can I trust you when you take advantage of me like this?"

"You said you were free," I muttered. "You admitted that you didn't care for Kemble."

"Did I?" She laughed mockingly and thrust out her fingers, fan-like, as before. A splendid solitaire blazed on one of them, and as I looked she bent and kissed it.

I staggered to my feet. I realized now that I had been upheld by the slender hope that she would not accept Kemble; but she had been playing with me all the time, just as I had known in my heart of hearts she must be.

"I beg your pardon," I said huskily. "I—I should have known better than believe you."

"You never do believe me when you should," she answered enigmatically; then, observing that I was putting together a few papers, she inquired nervously, "What are you doing that for?"

"I am going to quit. It wouldn't be honorable for me to stay here any longer; and —I don't believe I could stand it."

"But what will father do?"

"He can get a much better man for what he pays me."

"Nonsense! You're not going! What a silly you are!"

She dashed at me laughingly, snatched the papers from my hands, pushed me down into my usual chair, thrust a pen between my fingers and then leaned across the desk, twinkling her own fingers, once more unadorned.

"Can't you take a joke?" she demanded, between tears and laughter. "That's Bertie's ring. I had to take it away from him because he threatened to put it on the

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finger of the ugliest scrub-woman he could find, and marry her to spite me."

Bertie, be it understood, was a young millionaire—a "bit of an ass," as the English say—whose only sign of common-sense was the fact that he was hopelessly in love with Virginia. But nothing that she could do or say would ever make me believe that she could care for him.

"Then you're not engaged?" I asked.

She shook her bright head, blushing.

"I've promised neither my hand nor my heart—though it really isn't for you to ask, Sir Secretary. One might almost think you had a personal interest in the matter." And she challenged me with her eyes.

"I might have if I were anything but a secretary," I responded bitterly. "And if there weren't other things in the way."

She cocked her head on one side and studied me critically, while I blushed and fidgeted under her cool glance.

"You wouldn't make such a bad-looking husband if you shaved off your beard, and touched your hair just a teeny-weeny bit with brown dye. I suppose you've got to wear those stary glasses?"

"It wouldn't be safe to go without them."

"And what are the 'other things,' Mr. Secretary?"

"Seeing you at the Soubrette is one of them."

She caught her breath sharply and looked away.

"I—I've told you you were mistaken."

"I know better. There couldn't be two girls like you."

She smiled wanly at my unintentional compliment.

"You won't tell father of your—suspicions?"

"I kept him from discovering you."

"Thanks! Even though it wasn't I, that was good of you. What did you have to tell me about mamma?"

It was my turn to be embarrassed. What could I tell her that would help her without throwing suspicion on Kemble? And if I did that, wouldn't she be justified in believing that I was taking a dishonorable method of injuring a man whom, as I had shown her pretty plainly, I regarded as a possible rival? And, worst of all, wouldn't she think that I was still harking back to that scene in the Soubrette, which she so persistently disavowed?

"I—I've changed my mind," I faltered weakly.

"I haven't. I want to know why you asked me to come here. Was it just to accuse me of being in that awful place?"

"I had to know the truth," I muttered miserably.

"And you won't believe it when you hear it." She settled herself firmly in a chair. "I shan't stir from this room till you apologize—and tell me what I want to know."

She meant it, too; and I knew that she cared little or nothing for my news. What she wanted was my apology—my assurance that I believed in her. And that would be a lie!

I looked at her miserably, cursing myself for a fool for having got myself into such a position.

"I'm sorry," I began.

"That means you're still stubborn," she interrupted. "Begin again, please."

The telephone rang sharply and I turned to answer it, glad of the momentary respite. It was Dodge; but a strangely disturbed Dodge, to judge from his voice. A had telephoned that Dodge and I must meet him at once at a house in the remote suburbs. Dodge would await me at the most convenient meeting-point, but I must come without delay. I gave him my promise very willingly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fairchild, but I must leave you at once." And I began putting away some of the more important papers.

"Who was that?" she demanded suspiciously.

"My man, Dodge."

"He seems to be your master," she retorted.

"He was reminding me of a very important engagement. You'll excuse me, I hope?"

"Certainly not! I told you I would stay here till I got what I wanted, and I haven't got it."

"You have a perfect right to stay as long as you like," I answered coldly, for I thought her attitude childish. "It's your father's house."

"And you're really going?" she asked with naive wonder.

"I must."

"Is it my father's business?"

"In a way."

"That means it isn't! And what right have you to leave his business at the call of strange men?"

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"Miss Fairchild," I said patiently, "I can't stop to explain now."

"I believe it's all a ruse to enable you to run away from me!"

"I'm sorry."

I locked the desk and rose to go. With feminine suddenness she changed from command to entreaty.

"Please, Mr. Smith, don't go off and leave me like this—before you've told me you believe me."

I took the two hands she extended to me and pressed them tenderly.

"I must go. I can't tell you why, but it is very urgent. I am not running away—I am going out to fight for you; to fight in the dark, perhaps, against enemies stronger than I."

"You're going to fight for me?" Virginia asked wonderingly.

"I have been fighting for you ever since I first saw you, I think. I want to help you now, but you won't let me."

"I ask you to stay. Please!"

"I can't."

"You don't trust me!"

"I trust you as far as you will let me. Trust must be mutual. If you won't confide in me I can only put the worst construction upon what I know to be the truth."

"You're cruel!"

"I'm cruelly hurt."

I tried to withdraw my hands but she clung to them, sobbing. I bent and kissed her clasped hands, then gently released myself.

"Won't you wish me luck?" I asked.

"I wish I had never seen you!" she stormed. "I hope I shall never see you again!"

And so I set out to meet Dodge, heartily consigning to perdition A and all his works.

XIII

"QUEER STREET!" called the conductor as the suburban trolley car stopped with a jerk. Stiff from our long ride, Dodge and I alighted slowly.

"Know where one-sixty-three is?" asked my companion.

"Over there." The conductor waved his hand toward a solitary frame structure standing perhaps a quarter of a mile down the street.

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody 's I know of. Lots of folks ask for the place, but they all seem to be strangers."

The car started with a jerk and disappeared in a whirl of dust, while we looked about us curiously. On every hand lay the brown rolling fields, uncultivated and for the most part treeless, crossed at regular intervals by the plowed gutters and grass-grown lanes which were called streets. There were a few far-scattered houses, looking raw and desolate and out-of-place in that wilderness. The only believable sign that we were still within the limits of the city was a neglected and wind-shattered gasoline street lamp which still bore, though on the wrong side, the hardly decipherable legend, "Queriere St."

" 'Queer Street' indeed!" I grunted, as we plodded down the wheel-ruts. "I don't know which is the queerest—the men who laid it out, or the men who live here."

"Are you sure anybody does live here?" asked Dodge; and the voluntary question, so strangely at variance with his reticence during our ride, strengthened my suspicion that Dodge neither understood nor liked our errand.

"No, but it seems probable. Where there are houses there are apt to be people living. Yet I can't see a sign of life about these houses—not even smoke; and these wheel tracks are stale as a stogie butt."

Dodge nodded a puzzled agreement.

"Ever been here before that you know of?" he asked suddenly.

I looked at him, somewhat startled, and gave him a decided negative.

"Have you?" I asked in turn.

"I'm not sure. I've never *seen* it before; a man couldn't forget this—" he waved a hand over the landscape—"but I have an idea I've been here just the same. It smells natural, somehow; and I believe I've tramped this road before."

"When?"

The question brought Dodge to himself with a start. All expression faded from his face, and his mouth settled into two hard lines.

"You must excuse me, sir," he said with humble firmness.

We stopped before the lonely house and inspected it narrowly. It was an ordinary frame structure, of the pseudo-ornamental type common to "boom" suburban districts. It had two full stories and a gable attic, a small front porch, and the usual

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disfiguring "gingerbread" decorations about door and windows and gable ends. Its most noticeable feature was its comparative smartness. It was in good repair, and had been repainted recently enough to look clean and respectable. But there was no sign of inhabitants—not even a path through the weeds to the front door.

"This is our place, all right," I said, peering at the fanlight over the door. "There's the number—one-sixty-three. It looks innocent enough."

"Don't you see anything queer about the place?" asked Dodge.

"Nothing but the street."

"The curtains! Look at the curtains! Did you ever see such heavy ones in a house of that type? And look at these windows." I was following Dodge to the rear of the house. "The shades are pulled way down."

"Something to conceal," I muttered.

"We'll soon see," said Dodge with an energy that surprised me. "We're wasting time out here. Let's go in."

"Hadn't we better ring first?"

Dodge nodded agreement, mounted the porch with evident reluctance and gave the bell-pull a vigorous try. It was one of those old-fashioned door bells, relegated now to the rural districts, which comprise a handle, a long wire, and a bell on a spring, and operate by brute force. Dodge's pull sat the bell to playing weird fandangos, which echoed and re-echoed through the house but which brought no response.

"I guess it's safe enough," I suggested. "That merry chime would have roused the Seven Sleepers."

"Or put them on their guard," muttered Dodge.

"Nonsense! There's nobody here. Let's go in."

Dodge gave me a peculiar smile but continued to listen to the dying echoes of the bell. It was equally plain that he feared some terror that I could not guess at, and yet that he was as eager as I to probe the mysteries of this deserted house.

Finally he drew out his watch and made a mental calculation of the time, glanced up and down the deserted trolley line and the empty streets and gave the bell another determined pull.

"My orders were to bring you to this house," he vouchsafed. "Nothing was said about entering it."

"Any particular time?"

"As soon as possible."

"If we are expected to enter we shan't help matters any by waiting."

"You're not afraid?" he asked, with that peculiar smile.

"I haven't seen anything to be afraid of. Do you want me to lead the way?"

I knew that it was not my place to take the initiative, but I was tired of constantly encountering silly mysteries that I must not investigate. Here was something that I could look into; and I craved action, excitement, anything that would help me to forget the girl whom I had left weeping in the library.

Dodge carefully tried the door. It was locked. He tested it above and below the escutcheon, putting the full weight of his body against his flat hand; and it gave everywhere except at the knob. Satisfied that it was not bolted, he produced a pair of nippers and set to work on the lock. Evidently the fastening was as old-fashioned as the bell, for he quickly threw back the wards.

"I wish you'd show me that trick," I said, watching him admiringly.

But he put his finger to his lips; and in spite of his previous assertion that no one was about, he proceeded cautiously. After he had unlocked the door he stood for a moment listening. Then he turned the knob quietly, pushed the door open and entered the house. I followed close at his heels and pulled the door partly shut behind me.

THE front door opened into a long hall, narrowed by the staircase which led to the second floor. On either hand was a closed door. Dodge opened the right-hand door at a venture; while I, in answer to a warning gesture, stood guard in the hall.

The room was dark because of its curtains, and Dodge's first movement was to pull aside some of the drapery and let the waning daylight in. Then he stared wonderingly about the apartment, looked at me and surveyed the room again. Finally he drew his revolver and, nodding to me to remain where I was passed, out of sight.

I judged that he had changed his mind about the house being occupied, for I easily followed his progress by the noise he made. He went on through the other rooms, but apparently gave only a glance to each;

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upstairs and down he tramped, slamming doors and sounding walls. His pace, reasonably cautious at first, grew faster and more reckless as he progressed, till he descended the front stairs in a mad scramble.

"What's the matter?" I demanded as I peered past him into the shadows. "Anything chasing you?"

"Did you see a rat come down ahead of me?" he gasped.

"A rat?" I questioned stupidly.

"A big gray fellow, with something in his mouth. He came out of one of the rooms on the second floor."

"I dind't see him. But what is there strange about it?"

"What do you think of this?"

He pushed me through the open doorway into the room at the right. I stared about me, looked at him and surveyed the room again, just as he had done.

"By Jove!" I said softly. "Are they all the same?" Dodge nodded.

"Curtains everywhere; paper on the walls; carpets on the floors. But not a stick of furniture, not even a burnt match on the floor—not a sign anywhere that the house has been occupied, or even entered, since it was first built."

"And yet you saw a rat?"

"With something in his mouth. And there's not a thing in the house to eat."

"There's not even any dirt or dust," I added, "and no foot-tracks, except our own."

"Yes! I noticed that; it's the same way all through. There are plenty of negative signs that there have been people here recently—but they didn't *live* here."

"Then why did they come here?"

"Remember what the conductor said? Lots of people ask for this place, but they all seem to be strangers."

"It looks queer," I snapped, rendered querulous by my perplexity. "All those men aren't coming to this God-forsaken hole for nothing."

"Maybe the conductor lied," mused Dodge. "We'll have to look into that. Let's look over the house, now we're here."

"Shall I stand watch?" I asked. "You have keener eyes than I."

Dodge stepped out on the little porch and looked about. Then he reentered the house and closed and locked the door behind him.

"I think we'll take a chance on it. We can't have too many eyes—especially as we don't know what we're looking for."

"Is that why you're so nervous?" I asked.

Dodge looked at me a moment before he spoke.

"What makes you think I'm nervous?"

"I know you are; you were when you called me on the 'phone. What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know. That's just it."

"Why should A ask us to meet him at this out-of-the-way place?"

"I don't know; I'm just trying to find out. And first of all I'd like to know just how far this fake goes."

He turned on the three jets of the chandelier above his head, lighted a match and applied the flame to each in turn—with no result.

"Probably the gas isn't turned on," I ventured.

"There's no place to turn it on—no meter—no place for a meter. There's no cellar under the house, and no cellar door—inside or outside. I doubt if these chandeliers are even connected; more likely they're just nailed onto the cross-beams."

"Let's try the water," I suggested. "The bathroom looks all right, and so does the kitchen."

We tried both rooms with the same result. The water-cocks turned, but gave no water; the sewer-pipes were in place, but apparently led nowhere. I opened the kitchen door and peered about the yard.

"There's no pump, either. Where do they get their water? They must have used water to keep the place so spick and span."

"I wish I could get under the house," muttered Dodge.

"You're sure there isn't a trap-door some place?"

"Sure. I looked for it particularly. I don't think there is any excavation," he added, "and I don't believe there's a thing there—but I'd like to be sure."

"It would be easy enough to break a hole——"

"Not now!" interrupted Dodge hastily. "Let's go over the house again first. We'll begin at the front and search every room thoroughly."

"What are we looking for?" I asked.

"Anything—the least sign of occupancy, or anything that will give us a clue to the reason for this ghost of a house out here in this desert."

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We set about our task most systematically, and conducted it with a thoroughness that argued well for success. But at last we found ourselves in the upper hall—unsuccessful, more perplexed than ever, with no more lands to spy out.

"There ought to be a garret," I said, scowling at the ceiling. "It's a gable roof."

"You'd have to break into it if there is," answered Dodge. "We're not ready for that."

"S-sh!" I whispered warningly. "What was that?"

Dodge turned on me sharply.

"What did it sound like?"

"A step—on the front porch; yet it was too near."

Dodge listened intently for a few moments, then gave me a reassuring smile.

"Nonsense! This emptiness had got on your nerves— My God!" He jumped and paled a little as a hollow *bang!* echoed through the house. "That sounded like the front door—and I locked it after us. I think we're about to receive visitors, Smith."

"A?"

"I don't know."

MOVED by a common impulse, we drew our revolvers and stole down the hall toward the head of the stairway. The carpet caught our soft footsteps without betraying us; and only our hearts, pounding against our ribs, marred the peculiar stillness of the house.

Below there was nothing but that audible silence. We looked at one another, strained our ears and waited. Nothing happened.

Dodge craned his head over the banister so that he could survey the stairs and part of the hall below. For what seemed an age he looked and listened, then drew himself back with less care.

"Not a sign or a sound," he breathed, shaking his head in perplexity. "I'm going down." I started to follow, but he waved me back. "Wait here till I look around a bit."

He went softly but quickly down the stairs; and to me, waiting, gun in hand, in the gloom of the upper hall, it seemed years before he bade me descend.

"It's the same old story," he growled disgustedly, as I hurried to his side. "There's nobody here—no sign of any one." And I noticed that he had pocketed his revolver.

"The front door?"

"Locked, just as we left it."

"Well," said I, "it couldn't have been a ghost in broad daylight."

"And it wasn't simply imagination, for we both heard it."

"It *might* have been the wind," I suggested. "Let's take a look outside."

He threw open the front door and stepped out onto the porch. The sun was well down in the west now, and was beginning to tint the edges of the gray wilderness; otherwise the prospect was as dull and empty as ever.

"The wind doesn't wear shoes," objected Dodge, as he held aloft a moistened forefinger. "And besides," he concluded, "there is no wind."

XIV

AS WE turned to re-enter the house a big gray rat came out of the bushes, leaped up the steps, slipped across the threshold, and disappeared inside with a derisive squeak. I shivered, without knowing why, and looked at Dodge. He was staring after the rat, and I saw his hand twitch toward his revolver.

"You saw it too?" he asked, and looked relieved when I nodded assent. "There's something uncanny about it. Both those rats apparently had business here. Now, the only real business a rat has, is to eat; and there's not a thing to eat in this house."

"What puzzles me," I retorted, "is where they go to. We didn't find even a single rat-hole."

"A rat can go almost anywhere. I want to know what these fellows are up to."

I followed him into the house. Once more we locked the door and stood peering into the darkened rooms, listening for some sound of life. Outside a trolley car went droning by, and somewhere on the weed-grown desert a prowling cat called to its mate. But within there was only the whisper of our hushed breathing. I was about to voice my impatience at the absurdity of the situation when from overhead came the scampering of small feet and the squeals of excited rats.

Without a word, and with a single impulse, we leaped quietly up the carpeted stairs and looked down the hall. It was empty and silent as before.

"Do rats leave ghosts when they die?" asked Dodge, with a dry smile.

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"It's all nonsense!" I snapped. "There isn't enough food in the place to make a fly's breakfast."

Dodge stooped and touched his finger tip to a dark spot on the carpet.

"Then how do you account for this?" he asked, and extended his finger. Its tip was red with blood.

"We heard the rats quarreling," I retorted obstinately. "Probably one of them was hurt."

"If it were that, there would be more blood about," Dodge replied skeptically.

I walked a few steps down the hall and looked into the big room that took up most of the front of the house. Were my nerves playing tricks with me, or did I really see some movement in the shadows? I beckoned silently to Dodge, who came up on tiptoe and seemed to urge me forward, while himself hanging back.

JUST how the thing happened I do not know. A dazzling light flashed into my eyes; there was movement all about me, and the door into the hall closed with the click of a catching lock.

As the dazzle died out of my eyes I saw before me three men. All wore long motor coats, shapeless and shrouding, motor caps pulled well down over their ears, and black half-masks such I had seen on the two men who had visited me at my apartments. Doubting the truth of my still half-blinded eyes, I turned to Dodge. He was not in the room, and the door was shut.

I looked about for the source of the light that flooded the heavily-curtained room. I found it in a big electric lamp with a reflector shade, which was set in such a position that it cast most of its light upon me. Yet Dodge and I had found no lamp of any sort about the place.

It was easy to determine which of the three masks was the chief. He stood a pace or two before the others; but aside from that he had the air of one accustomed to command. I observed him narrowly, looking in vain for some familiar sign. If he were A, as I naturally supposed, there was absolutely nothing about him upon which I could depend for future recognition.

I suppose it was less than a minute that we stood in silence; but it seemed to me days before the chief spoke.

"Smith," he asked quietly, "what is your price?"

At the sound of his voice I started and shook off my fears. Whoever A might be, this was not he—or else the voice which now addressed me was disguised in some different fashion.

"Well?" demanded the unknown impatiently.

"What's your offer?"

"Anything you like," he answered; and I thought I detected a note of eagerness in his voice.

I stared through the slits in his mask, wondering where I had seen those eyes before.

"I have about all I want now," was my indifferent response.

"All?" he questioned with a peculiar emphasis on the word.

"Money can't buy me," I retorted stolidly.

"But something else can," he suggested, coming a step nearer me and letting his eyes burn into mine. "There's Kemble, now——"

"I've refused that proposition before," I snapped.

He laughed evilly—

"A man never really refuses the chance to get possession of the woman he loves."

I saw red at that, and he must have seen murder in my face. But he never moved, and when I had sufficiently mastered myself to reach for my revolver it was gone. I recalled thinking that Dodge had jostled me as he pushed me into the room, and I surmised that he had taken my gun. Thus was I doubly betrayed.

"Don't be a fool, man," sneered the chief. "You're trapped, and you might as well make the best of it. What's your price?"

"You got me here by a trick——"

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Never mind how—but I got you; and you're still here."

"What do you want?"

"Detailed reports of everything Colonel Fairchild says and does and thinks."

"How long do you suppose I'd last?"

"Long enough for my purpose," he retorted, with a brutal laugh that was echoed by one of his men.

The echo cooled my heating temper. I looked closely at the two men in the background. They were as impassive and watchful as ever; but they were almost on a line with their chief, which meant that they were appreciably nearer to me.

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"Which one of you is A?" I demanded suddenly.

The two silent ones started noticeably; the start of the chief was almost imperceptible, but I caught it.

"I'm A's man," I said defiantly. "Who are you?"

The two satellites moved uneasily, but the chief eyed me menacingly through his mask.

"We're friends of P," he said coldly, "the man you murdered at your own door."

In the silence that followed I heard the distant squeal of an angered rat, and I felt the hair prickle along the back of my neck.

"That's a lie!" I retorted stoutly. "And if you lay a hand on me you'll answer to A."

I saw the satellites shift uneasy feet, and for a moment I thought my bluff would carry me through. But the chief laughed dryly.

"A isn't here, my brave man. And you'll never leave the place alive unless I say so."

He spoke aside to his companions, and they moved forward; none too willingly.

"Are you sure?" one of them broke his silence to whisper.

"Sure? Did you ever know me to be anything else?" snarled the chief. "He's a figurehead—an outsider. And suppose he is A's man? What's that to you or me? Get at it!"

THE two minions glanced at each other, afraid either to obey or to refuse; but still they came on, stealthily, surely, like two tigers stalking their prey, their shuffling feet making no sound on the carpeted floor.

I edged away, purposing to get my back against a wall that I might have something like an even chance against them. But one of the fellows darted forward and slipped his foot between my feet with a quick twist and push. I stumbled, completely off my balance, into the arms of the other.

Even at that I think I did pretty well. As I fell I caught the one who had tripped me a jab in the stomach that made him grunt, and fairly bowled the other over by the impact of my weight. But he clutched me and hung on. Then the man with the stomachache fetched me a blow in the face that smashed my glasses, and in a moment I was smothered beneath two cursing, hammering fighters.

Presently, at a word from the chief, one of them dragged me to my feet and took my right arm in a grip which caused me excruciating agony every time I moved.

"I'll get you for this!" I snarled, aiming a wavering blow at the chief with my left; but he stepped nimbly aside, and my captor gave my arm an unnecessary twist for my pains.

"Open the trap," growled the chief, "and show him what's coming to him."

The odd man did something to the open door of the closet. The whole flooring of the little cubby hole flew back like a lid, and a shaft of light came up as from the gaping door of hell. With it came the sound of squealing rats, the musky odor of their bodies, and the smell of fresh blood.

Forced forward by my arm-twisting captor, I looked down into the hole. Curiously enough, I could not see straight down, but must look into a great mirror set at an angle; but I saw enough to make me shudder.

In a narrow, well-like space, lighted by concealed incandescents that left nothing to the imagination, hung the body of a man, head downward; and squealing rats——

I have dabbled too much in surgery to be very squeamish; but at this sight I felt myself growing sick and falling, in spite of the cruel grip on my arm. When I could see again the trap was closed and I was lying in the center of the room looking up into the grim masks of my torturers.

The chief waved a hand toward the closet door.

"That fellow went down there alive. He was just as stubborn as you are—till the rats got him. Don't you think you'd better change your mind?"

If I had been a free man I should have done anything he asked, for the rats had already "got me," so far as my nerves were concerned. But what was the use? If I acceded to his demands, I should be soon exposed to the Colonel and Virginia as a twice-bought spy—to Virginia, whom I had lectured so righteously that very afternoon! I preferred to die—to keep my secret, and to hope that she might some day forgive me for my doubt of her and think of me kindly as one who had tried in his blundering way to help her.

"I'm A's man," I repeated wearily.

"See what he's got on him," ordered the chief shortly, and turned away.

One of the two hauled me to my feet,

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and supported me, for I was too sick and shaken to stand alone; while the other rapidly searched me. I had no fear that he would find anything of importance; therefore I was the more surprised at his sudden exclamation.

"What is it?" snapped the chief, coming toward us.

The searcher held up my Greek-lettered token.

The chief started and muttered something into his mask, then took the token and scrutinized it closely, turning it over and over in his gloved fingers. The other two showed something akin to terror and supported me gently between them.

"Where did you get this?" demanded the chief at length.

"You found it on me," I retorted sturdily.

"What's your monaker?"

"Smith."

"Your letter?"

"Isn't that enough?" I pointed dramatically to the shining token in his hand.

"Your letter?" he repeated fiercely.

"Easy on that," one of my supporters interposed. "It ain't for you to ask."

My inquisitor surveyed his companions hesitatingly, then handed me the token.

"Get out," he said tartly. "Keep your mouth shut and your ear close to the ground. You're in bad, and the rats will get you yet if you aren't more careful. That thing won't help you the next time I come after you."

At a signal from him the other two pushed me out into the hall and locked the door behind me; and I had not gone more than two steps when I heard the muffled chorus of squealing rats.

AS I CAME unsteadily down the stairs, leaning on the hand-rail for support, Dodge was waiting in the lower hall. At sight of me he slipped a revolver into either pocket and started up to help me.

"You go to the devil!" I growled, striking aside his extended hand. "You left me to die alone; now I'll get home alone. Give me my gun and clear out."

He handed me the weapon silently, and I saw with pleasure that he had not removed the cartridges.

"That was a dirty trick, your leaving me," I said, handling the gun carelessly in a vain effort to make him apprehensive.

"Orders, sir."

"I suppose it was orders, too, to disarm me?"

"No, sir."

"Then why did you do it?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I think I saved your life. If you'd ever started shooting you wouldn't be here now."

I stared into his impassive face with a growing suspicion that I had been unjust to him.

"Were you told to wait for me?"

"No, sir; I was told to leave you here."

I slipped my arm through his with a delightful sense of relief.

"I take it all back, Dodge. Will you get me home? I'm about all in."

"I'd better get you a taxi, sir. You won't mind waiting a few minutes?"

"Here?"

"If you please, sir"—he pointed across the fields to where, in the thickening twilight, moved something dark and swift that might have been a motor-car—"they're getting away as fast as they can."

"But how did they get out?"

He looked at me pityingly.

"There's a secret passage somewhere, sir—very likely it comes out a block away."

"Impossible!"

"There must be, sir. It's the only possible explanation."

"All right," I said wearily, sitting down on the porch steps. "Be as quick as you can. If I see another rat I'll start shooting."

But nothing disturbed me until Dodge came bowling up in a taxicab. The long, weary ride was to me a succession of broken nightmares in which every sight and sound recalled my recent experiences.

"A would be interested to know all about it, sir," was one of Dodge's first suggestions.

"If A can't protect me he can't question me," I declared bitterly. "I told them I was his man—and you see what they did to me."

"Ah!" said Dodge in a tone that showed that I had given him important information.

"Look here, Dodge," I said later, tired of his skilful attempts to trap me. "You can tell A whatever you want to—I'll be hanged if I care. I'll tell *you* exactly what happened in that upper room."

But I did not tell him how Virginia had

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been brought into the affair, since that had had no real bearing upon the outcome.

"Now what do you make of it all?" I demanded when my tale was done.

"It was a plant, sir. But I can't think what they wanted, unless it was a chance to search you."

"What did they expect to find?"

"I don't know, sir. Certainly not the token, as you call it."

"What do you call it? What does the thing signify?"

"I don't know, sir," he answered blandly.

And though I suspected he was lying, I did not press the question.

"Have you any idea who the men were?" I asked.

"I think I could name the leader, sir. You didn't recognize any of them?"

"No," I answered shortly; for I saw no reason for telling him that I thought that I, too, could name the leader.

XV

"MISS FAIRCHILD and the Colonel are below, sir," announced Dodge, turning from answering the house telephone.

"What?" I gasped, springing from my easy chair and folding my dressing-gown about my half-clad form.

"Shall I have them up, sir?"

"Certainly! And open up here and get some of this smoke out; and then come and help me dress." And I fled to the privacy of my bedroom.

When I had telephoned to the Colonel that I should like to keep to my room for a day or two he had insisted upon coming over to see me at once; but he had said nothing of bringing Virginia. What had prompted her to come with him I did not dare think, because, after having left her in tears and anger the day before, my common sense would not permit me to believe what my heart suggested. But she had come, and that in itself was enough to raise again my hopes.

I was not an interesting invalid, at least so far as appearances went. I had not realized, until I began to take stock of my injuries, how roughly I had been handled during my short fight with my two masked assailants. To cap it all, my nerves seemed to be a jangling assortment of taut wires which were liable to snap without warning. If the Colonel had come alone I should not have cared so much, for an old soldier would understand; but Virginia—that was quite a different matter.

When finally, half supported on Dodge's arm, I tottered into the living-room, I knew from the startled faces of my visitors that I was something of a sight. The Colonel, with a profane ejaculation, sprang out of my big chair and helped Dodge to ease me down into the place that he had vacated; while Virginia, looking very pale and aloof, half turned away as if to spare me the humiliation of having her witness my weakness.

"What's the cause of this?" demanded the Colonel suspiciously. "More detective work?"

"Just a little misunderstanding," I answered carelessly. "Miss Fairchild, I must apologize for my appearance."

Virginia turned from the window and came slowly toward me. Her manner was cold, shy, almost fearful; and her eyes held a mute question.

"I hope you're not badly hurt," she said.

"Not nearly as bad as I look," I answered. "I shall be out in a day or two."

"You—you said you had a misunderstanding?"

I knew then why she had come to see me. It was not from any care for me, but because she was afraid of what I might have discovered.

"Yes," I answered bitterly, holding her eyes with a look that I knew she would properly interpret. "It was a misunderstanding all around—and I got the worst of it."

"I'll bet the other fellow doesn't think so," growled the Colonel.

I held out the hand with the broken knuckles, which, in spite of Dodge's skilful bandaging, was not a pretty sight.

"I did the best I could, Colonel, but there were three of them."

The Colonel swore under his breath, while Virginia, paler than before, unpinned the bunch of violets that she was wearing and timidly offered it to me.

"I didn't bring you any flowers—I didn't realize how badly you were hurt, and it always seems silly to take flowers to a man. But—would you take these?"

Now wasn't that just like a woman? She had told me, as plainly as she could, that her only interest lay in whatever I

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might have discovered. And here she was offering me flowers that she had been wearing—flowers thereby sweeter and fresher and dearer to me than any others, as she must have known.

Of course I took the flowers, and I buried my face in their fragrant depths. It was the first lover's token that I had ever had from her. And she had given it unasked, with an impulse that I could not call anything but tender. Why had she done it? Was it relief that my mission had failed, mere physical sympathy for my physical hurts, or was it indeed an offering of peace and a tender of renewed friendship?

"You'll excuse me if I run away, Mr. Smith? I have rather an important engagement with Mr. Kemble, but I felt that I must see how you really were. And I shall have to stop at the florist's for more violets; Mr. Kemble sent me those, and he might miss them. You don't mind, do you?"

I assured her that I did not. Indeed, I was inwardly tickled that Kemble was buying violets for Virginia to give to me; but the rest of her speech did not at all please me. I could make of it only one thing: that, having satisfied herself that I had no new hold on her, she could not spare me even five minutes of her time, but must rush away to her fiancé.

"You'll let me know if there is anything I can do for you?"

"Thank you," I answered with a politeness and indifference equal to hers. "I am sure there will be nothing, Miss Fairchild."

As the outer door closed behind his daughter the Colonel thrust a cigar into my hand, pulled his chair around facing me and lighted his own weed.

"I know how you feel about having a woman see you the day after," he said apologetically, "but Virginia would come. Now, Smith, let's have the story."

I had anticipated that very natural question, and had long since determined on my answer.

"I was offered a big bribe to betray you into the hands of your enemies."

"How much?"

"Anything I wanted to name."

"Who were they?"

"If I knew, they would be behind bars now."

"And they beat you up when you refused?"

I nodded and smiled.

"Smith," began the Colonel with a gulp.

"Hold on, Colonel! You've got to take my word for this story. I'm not going to offer proof, or give you any further details."

"—— your proofs!" roared the Colonel, catching my damaged hand in a grip that made me wince. "Don't you suppose I know an honest man when I see one?"

He did not question me further; and when he finally left me he was still giving me first-aid-to-the-injured suggestions that had gone out with the Civil War.

I HAD several reasons for telling the Colonel so much of the truth. In the first place, it seemed an opportune time to warn him that he was being spied upon, particularly since A had evidently had nothing to do with this particular affair. Then, it seemed a good chance to strengthen his confidence in me, for I was certain that he would accept my unsupported word in the matter. And finally, I hoped that he would talk the matter over with Virginia, and so show her that I had a vital reason for leaving her that afternoon, and that I had been faithful in spite of temptation and torture.

For I was come to that pass where I judged my every thought and action by its probable effect upon Virginia's regard for me.

I had finally convinced myself that Virginia could never love me. Whatever flickering hopes had supported me through my ordeal in the Queer Street charnel house had been snuffed out by her unmistakable attitude during her brief call. It was not of me that she had been thinking, but of how my mysterious summons might effect her and Kemble.

But, having buried my murdered love, I was not one to mourn idly beside its grave. I was still able to make Virginia's life happier by protecting her and her father from the unguessed enemies that beset them; and in so doing I might be able to avenge some of my own personal hurts.

Accordingly, I was back at the desk in the library sooner than I had at first intended. The Colonel protested profanely but was secretly pleased, both because he needed me badly, and because he had an old soldier's contempt for a man who coddled his wounds. Virginia, sweetly impersonal, scolded me prettily for my rashness,

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but accepted as final my assurance that I felt better when busy than idle. Even Kemble, with an appearance of sympathy for which I admired him, asked solicitously about my health for several days, and complimented me upon my spirit and my interest in my work.

The work of the Commission was of necessity conducted with so much secrecy that friendly newspapers and the better-inclined classes of the city were often skeptical both of our complete sincerity and of our ultimate success. It was essential that we should have the full sympathy and support of the people who had put the reform administration in power. Accordingly we arranged for a gigantic mass-meeting; and, while we issued tickets for the full capacity of the hall, we distributed them with care.

Late in the afternoon of the day set for the mass-meeting Virginia came into the library, so excited that she did not even apologize for interrupting us.

"Papa!" she cried, almost tearfully. "Whatever am I going to do? Harry has been called out of the city, and can't take me to the hall tonight! Can't I go with you?"

"Out of the question!" snapped the Colonel. "Ask Bertie."

"I want a man," she retorted. "You told me yourself there might be trouble."

"And I told you in the beginning you'd be wiser to stay away."

"I won't!" She stamped her foot with a decision that was final. "I'm going to that meeting if I have to go alone."

"That's out of the question!" stormed her father. "If you can't rake up a proper escort you'll have to stay at home. It's no place for a woman, anyhow."

"Might I offer my escort?" I suggested.

"I can't spare you!" snapped the Colonel.

"Just to the hall and back. Miss Fairchild would be safe enough, once she's in her seat."

"All right!" was the Colonel's ungracious agreement. "Now leave us, Virginia — please. We're up to our necks."

I looked to Virginia for her decision. I had no intention of forcing myself upon her, and I felt that it was hardly possible that she would accept my offer. She returned my carefully impersonal look with one that showed both astonishment and doubt. It was evident that she had had no thought of my offering to escort her—that she had been intending to bully or wheedle her father into taking her.

"I'm completely at your service, Miss Fairchild," I said with a grave smile. "Yours to take or to leave."

"Thank you. I'll let you take me, Mr. Smith, if you'll be so kind."

"I shall be very glad to do so. To help me identify you in the crush after the meeting, would you mind wearing that big hat with the white plume?"

She gave me a startled curious glance. "It's—it's out of fashion," she protested.

"Do as he says!" snarled the Colonel. "It's a very sensible suggestion. And for God's sake, Virginia——"

But Virginia had gone—though not before she had made another futile attempt to search my eyes for hidden motives.

When I told the Colonel that I was going home to dress, he cursed me for a fool; but I was determined that I should be appropriately attired. So the Colonel placed at my immediate disposal the high-powered motor coupé in which I should later escort Virginia.

I urged the chauffeur to reckless speed, and once in my own apartments even stirred Dodge out of his customary calm. Dressed at last, I thrust into my pocket the cigar-case that Dodge had filled for me and reached into the match-stand on my dresser.

"I'm very sorry, sir," stammered Dodge, "but I quite forgot we were out of matches. I can borrow some——"

"I can't wait——"

"Will this do, sir?" He produced a patent cigar-lighter and snapped it into a blaze.

I dropped it into my overcoat pocket and ran for the elevator. But as I left the cage on the ground floor I stopped, despite my haste. On the curb, apparently talking to my chauffeur, was that harbinger of evil, the crippled shoe-string peddler. I had not seen him since he had endeavored to involve me in the murder of P. Hoping to catch him, I hurried silently into the street; but the fellow saw me coming, dodged around the front of the machine and hobbled across the street.

"What did that beggar want?" I asked the chauffeur.

"Information, sir," grinned the man.

"Did he get it?"

"I've been with the Colonel three years, sir," he answered meaningly.

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OF MY ride to the hall with Virginia I need say nothing, nor need I say more of our return journey up to a certain point; for Virginia, while friendly, was as impersonal and as aloof as if I had been a servant detailed to escort duty. And was I really anything more? I asked myself bitterly, and cursed the insane hope that had prompted me to offer my services.

As we were passing through the Strip on our homeward journey a tire blew out, and the car lurched heavily before it came to a standstill. After a brief investigation the chauffeur informed us that the bursting tire had let the wheel slue into a rut, and that the wheel was too badly damaged for him to repair.

"There's a drug-store on the next corner, sir," he added. "Shall I call a taxi, or would you rather wait there for one?"

Knowing the Strip as well as I did, I felt that the veiled suggestion in his last words was worth acting upon.

"We'll all three go to the drug-store," I decided.

"Very well, sir," he answered; and when I helped Virginia out he fell in on the other side of her, though at a respectful interval.

Virginia was rather pleased than otherwise by our predicament; but I was far from pleased. I was suspicious, almost fearful. The chauffeur appeared to be perfectly honest, but I had seen him talking to the crippled beggar; and I believed that rascally faker capable of almost any villainy.

The drug-store was within calling distance when something brushed against me, and I turned to clutch at a hand that had slipped into my overcoat pocket. The robber wrenched his hand free; there was a flash and a smell of burning wool, and a hot place developed against my side. Whatever his real purpose, the thief had set off the cigar-lighter in my pocket. I crushed the blaze out with my hands, tossed the hot metal contrivance into the gutter and turned to Virginia with a reassuring laugh.

"I'd have given the rascal a light, if he'd asked for it."

There was no answer. Virginia was gone.

XVI

THE street had that curious lack of life and sound which in such a neighborhood so often follows a crime. It was as if each wretched inhabitant of the Strip, guiltily conscious of some past misdeed, feared to betray his existence lest this thing be fastened upon him.

A hundred feet ahead of me blazed the gaudy lights of the drug-store. Behind me, lurching drunkenly into the rut, stood the disabled motor-car. But the chauffeur was gone, the pickpocket was gone—Virginia was gone.

From my knowledge of the criminal classes I was confident that Virginia had been whisked into an adjacent building, where she would be held till it was safe to transfer her. She might be within a dozen feet of me—might even be looking down upon me and reaching out unseen hands as I stood there dazed and without volition. It would be a simple matter to have the houses in the vicinity searched; but if I could have been sure that Virginia was in no immediate danger I should have taken no such step but should have awaited a proposal from her captors.

The difficulty was that I had no real idea why she had been spirited away, and being forced to guess, I naturally suspected the worst.

Our mass-meeting had been a tremendous success. The better element of the city had given the work of the Commission its unqualified approval. What more natural then than to suppose that the lawless element had kidnaped Virginia to hold as a club over the head of the Colonel, their most determined and best hated enemy?

All these things passed through my mind with the incredible rapidity of thought; and I was on the trail, I verily believe, so quickly that I pressed the miscreants hard.

Not that there really was any trail to follow. I made a hasty but thorough examination of hallways and areaways on both sides of the street without discovering even a hiding dog. I went into the corner drug-store, and having first sent a hurry call for a taxi-cab searched it thoroughly by virtue of my special officer's badge. But nowhere did I find a sign of anything unusual.

Perhaps my next step should have been to notify the Colonel, and through him the police. Instead I rushed out to the waiting taxi, displayed my badge, gave a twenty-dollar yellow-back to the cabby and ordered him to get me to Transom Court without regard to speed regulations. But neither unlimited money nor absolute authority can accomplish the impossible. We ran into a jam of traffic from a late-closing theater

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and for several blocks crawled along with the slow-moving throng.

As the congestion lessened, and the diverging lines of vehicles quickened their pace, a motor-car passed us going in the opposite direction. Some instinct or some familiar flash of white drew my attention, and I leaned forward to peer into its electric-lighted interior. Under a big white-plumed hat I glimpsed the face of Virginia Fairchild; beside her, in an attitude of easy intimacy, lounged the stranger to whom I had seen her paying money in the booth at the Soubrette. Attracted by my gaze, Virginia looked up, smiled and waved her hand—a little mockingly, I thought. Then the traffic opened ahead of them and their car leaped past.

"Follow that car!" I shouted up the speaking tube.

"What number, sir?"

"I don't know."

"Which direction?"

"North."

"It can't be done, sir. If I turn an inch I'll get a wheel dished. They'd be a mile away before I could get after them."

"All right. Transom Court then," I said wearily, for I knew the fellow was right. And somehow that last glimpse of Virginia had taken the heart out of me.

Why should I break my neck trying to rescue her from a situation that she apparently enjoyed? And was it not probable, especially after what I had just seen, that she was in the hands of her friends? The old doubts again assailed me; but so long as they were not absolute certainties I must carry out my plans.

Dodge met me at the door of my apartment and offered to take my coat.

"My taxi's waiting—I'm going out again," I said. "Come in here; I want to show you something."

He followed me obediently into the living-room, and at my suggestion went to open the front window. When he turned I was between him and the door, with a revolver trained upon him.

"Where's Miss Fairchild?"

Dodge lifted his eyes from the revolver muzzle to meet my threatening glance. His face was as impassive as ever; but his eyelids flickered momentarily.

"Miss Fairchild, sir?"

"She was kidnaped—taken from my side on our way home from the hall."

"And you think I had a hand in it, sir?"

"I know you had! Why else did you give me that cigar-lighter to set my clothes afire and distract my attention?"

Dodge smiled faintly.

"You flatter my cleverness, sir. It was a mere chance our being out of matches."

I advanced upon him angrily and thrust the cold muzzle of the revolver against his forehead.

"Stop your fencing! Tell me what they've done with her! I know you're mixed up in it somehow."

"I give you my word, sir——"

"The word of a crook and the tool of crooks! I'll give you till I count three to speak."

"Mr. Smith——"

"One!"

"If you kill me, sir, will you be any the wiser?"

I lowered my weapon reluctantly, for I was mad with the lust for blood; and he was the only one of those I suspected that I had been able to reach. But he was right.

"Don't think I'm afraid to die, sir. I've carried my life in my hand for ten years, ready to throw it away to gain my end. I'm too near now—we're both too near what we seek—to spoil everything in a moment of anger."

"I want facts, not arguments."

"What do you wish to know, sir?"

"Where can I find A?"

"A didn't do it, sir," he answered positively.

"Then for God's sake, who did?"

"I don't know, sir."

I raised my weapon threateningly, but he finished earnestly—

"But I think I can put you in the way to learn."

"Get at it then."

"Shall I dismiss your cab first, sir? It will be a long story."

I NODDED shortly, and he gave the necessary order over the house telephone. When he turned back he had dropped something of his servility, though he was still respectful enough. Appreciating the implication that the attitude of master and servant was absurd under the circumstances, I motioned him to a seat and took my own easy chair. I kept my revolver ready for emergencies, though I felt that the fellow was honest enough.

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"Smoke, if you like," I said, lighting a cigar myself. "But get at your story, Dodge. Every minute will be an age until I restore that poor girl to her father."

"Patience!" he advised. "She's in no immediate danger, if my surmise is right; and if it's not, there's nothing we can do. Smith, I'm going to put my life in your hands."

"It's there now," I retorted impatiently, with a suggestive motion of the revolver.

Dodge allowed a real smile to crease his impassive visage.

"My dear man, I could have disarmed you a dozen times while you were standing over me. You never were meant for a gunman. Your best weapon is your fists—and your courage."

"Thanks for that much," I growled, considerably nettled by his assumption of superiority.

"I didn't mean to be insolent—sir-r." He dragged out the last word with a good-natured twinkle of the eye that negatived the sarcasm in his voice; then his face went suddenly grave. "To help you at all I must tell you secrets whose betrayal means death—to you as well as to me." He waved aside my attempt to promise secrecy. "I don't ask any promise, Smith—I'm doing this voluntarily, mind; but I want you to understand that unless you do keep a close mouth and do exactly as I tell you, you will be the first to suffer."

"Get at it," I repeated doggedly.

"You must have suspected before this that you are mixed up, not with a single individual, but with a carefully organized gang."

"Several gangs," I corrected.

"Apparently. In reality, there is one big central organization of many gangs, and there is a fierce factional fight on. That ought to explain many things." I nodded eager agreement. "The chief fight is between A and X——"

"Then it's not a mere coincidence, this use of letters instead of names?"

"They call themselves the Alphabet; and some of us, who are not thoroughly in sympathy with their methods, prefix the adjective Red."

"The Red Alphabet!" I murmured, recalling a succession of bloody scenes that justified the prefix. "And what part do you have in it all?"

He hesitated, then met my eyes frankly.

"My position in no wise affects what I'm telling you. Now, I *know*, Smith, that A had nothing whatever to do with the kidnaping of Miss Fairchild. I won't say that he is not capable of it; but I *know* that it will smash his plans."

"Then it's X?"

"I believe so—I don't know."

"Who is X?"

"I don't know."

"But you suspect?"

"I suspect several persons."

"Then who is A?"

"That I must decline to tell. It wouldn't help you to know——"

"You're using me to do something that you don't dare do yourself!" I cried hotly.

Dodge smiled his appreciation.

"Your sure guess justifies my opinion of you, Smith. Only 'dare' isn't exactly the word. 'Prefer' is closer to the truth. I *could* do it—perhaps better than you; but I should have to leave undone too many other things that are more important to me."

"What are you driving at?"

Dodge leaned forward to fix my glance with an impressive forefinger.

"I'm going to tell you how to get into a secret meeting of the Alphabet where you can learn all you want to know."

I sprang to my feet, slipped my revolver into my pocket, and began buttoning up the overcoat that I had forgotten to discard.

"Give me the address—quick!"

"Sit down, man!" said Dodge, with a laugh that was anything but derisive. "They don't meet until midnight tomorrow—and they're harder to sneak in on than a meeting of thirty-third degree Masons."

I flung off my coat in a passion and threw myself back into my chair.

"Every time you open your mouth you make the chance of rescue more remote."

"I'm telling you the exact truth. It's taken me years to learn what I know, and it will take you hours to prepare yourself to stand all their tests."

"I don't believe you! The Vice Commission had gone to the bottom of every crooked gang in this city, and we never came across a letter of the Alphabet."

"But you've felt all the time that somewhere—just out of reach—was a mysterious force that was fighting you from ambush?"

"Yes."

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"That's the Alphabet. Your Vice Commission is a thing of weeks. The Alphabet is the slow and careful work of years. You know enough of the wrong side of life to realize that some of the shrewdest men prefer the crooked game because it gives them more exciting exercise for their wits. That's the Alphabet! They are schemers, organizers, the nearest thing I ever saw to that impossible figure of speech—a chain without a weak link. If they hadn't been foolish enough to let this factional fight get away with them we'd have no chance against them."

WITH this enthusiastic preface Dodge got down to business.

"You know that queer, old-fashioned boarding-house on the Avenue, between the Fosdick building and the beginning of Automobile Row? That's their headquarters. The 'Alpha Omega House,' the neighbors call it. *They* know it as 'Alpha House.' "

"Alpha? Omega?" I stammered, producing my Greek-lettered token and staring from its red-enameled sides to Dodge's smiling face.

"Exactly! That explains somewhat, the miraculous power of your pocket-piece, eh?"

"But not how I came by it."

"That's another story. Alpha, the inner circle, is composed of six men—five gang-leaders, and a sixth elected from their number, whose place is immediately filled from his gang." He drew from his pocket six pennies and a dime, and arranged the coppers in a hexagon, centered on the silver piece. "The sign of the six, or Alpha. Do you remember?"

"And two nickels!" I gasped. "The twenty-six letters of the alphabet!"

"You're getting on!" laughed Dodge. "I told A I was afraid you might read the cipher; but he evidently knew you better than I."

"A is the head, I suppose?"

"The 'Odd Letter,' they call him, because once elected to that high office, he is supposed to forget the gang from which he rose."

"I'm ashamed of my stupidity, Dodge—and my doubts. There must be something big behind all this mummery."

"The biggest thing in all the history of crookdom. These mummeries are only the trappings of a big idea, like the public panoply of any of the great secret societies. It is organized crime and outlawry.

"There are five chief gangs, each composed of five letters who are in turn the chiefs of as many unlettered gangs. The organization has infinite ramifications. Thousands of more or less unscrupulous persons, who have no idea of the big idea behind it all, are doing their little part to increase the efficiency of the Alphabet.

"It buys many men who know only the person who buys them. It never hesitates to spend money to get what it wants—for it can always get more money. It has business and political pulls, all personal in appearance, but all directed to the best good of the Red Alphabet."

"But what holds them all together?"

"Chiefly the love of easy money—man's most besetting sin. Some, of course, serve through fear; and many of the Letters are influenced by the love of power. But, after all, it all harks back to the desire for money, and the things money alone can buy.

"The present members of Alpha are A, F, J, O, Q and X. F is leader of Eta, the gunmen, comprising all crooks who prefer to use violence in their operations. J heads Iota, the thieves, who rely on cleverness rather than violence. O is chief of Omicron, the blackmailers——"

"Blackmailers!" I gasped.

"Yes; P was one of them."

I nodded, but I was not thinking of P alone; I was wondering, and hardly daring to surmise, whether Virginia were a tool or a victim of this hideous organization.

"Are—are there any women members?"

Dodge's quick glance was his only comment on my agitation.

"Women are often used, of course; but they don't belong. The Alphabet believes in the much-debated theory that no woman can be trusted with a secret. Omicron claims to be the aristocracy of the Alphabet, because its members are so seldom brought to justice or even troubled by the law.

"It's a fearsome gang, Smith, made up of fake doctors who advertise to cure unnamable diseases, and then blackmail their victims; shysters of every profession; men who live by the lust of men and the shame of women— Bah! it makes me sick to think of them."

It made me sick, too—deathly sick with fear for Virginia, who had fallen into their

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clutches, and with a numbing terror lest she might be indeed the willing tool that I had come to suspect.

"Then there's Q's gang—Upsilon, the con men, who range from pseudo-respectable get-rich-quick operators to short-change artists, thimble riggers and cheap swindlers of all types. They're arrant cowards, most of them; but some of them have got brains. X is head of Omega, the beggars——"

"I don't believe you can tell me much about them," I laughed bitterly. "I know enough of them and give them enough, to be eligible for membership."

"Don't apply," grinned Dodge. "They're the dogs of the underworld, looked down upon by all the others. But they're mighty useful as lookouts, shadows and spies generally."

"I can vouch for that," I said dryly. "I've had them on my trail ever since I came here."

"You see the reason, of course. You're A's man, while X is chief of the beggars."

"What was A's gang originally? For according to your statement he must once have had another letter."

"I'd better not tell you," said Dodge slowly. "It won't do you any good to know."

"And where in this infernal Alphabet do you belong?"

Dodge laughed and shook his head.

"I didn't say that I did belong."

"But you must, to know so much about it."

Dodge's face darkened.

"There's one thing stronger than the love of money, Smith—that's revenge." Then before I could question him further he went back to business. "Here's my plan. The only way you can get into Alpha is to impersonate one of the members."

"I know you're clever at disguises——"

"Alpha provides its own disguise. They all meet masked, man! Hadn't you guessed that? No member of Alpha knows the real identity of his fellow members."

"Impossible!"

"You'll change your mind if you're lucky enough to break in. That's one reason the organization is so secret—it's practically impossible for one man to betray another. Now J, the leader of the thieves, is a peteman, or safe-breaker, of international reputation. He's on edge to pull off a big job here to show his contempt for the Vice Commission; but he hasn't been able to get the lay that he wants. I'll make an appointment with him shortly before he ought to be at the meeting, and I'll keep him talking till you've had time to get into Alpha in his place."

"But I can't impersonate a low-browed safe-cracker."

Dodge grinned delightedly.

"My dear man, I picked him particularly because he's just your type. J is a graduate of one of the best engineering colleges in the country. He wears a B. S. and an M. E. after his name just as rightfully as he ought to be wearing a ball and chain. The disguise will do the rest."

"But how am I to get the disguise?"

"This is how. And if you haven't a good memory God help you, for the least slip will mean your death—and perhaps Miss Fairchild's."

His seriousness enforced my belief; but I believed him still more sincerely long before my whirling brain could master all that he endeavored to teach me. Hodge-podge though much of it was, often bordering on the cheap and ludicrous, there ran through it all that threatening undertone of deadly seriousness that held me doggedly to my task.

I had crammed in college to get a passing grade in neglected studies; I had undergone the petty harrowings of initiation into undergraduate secret societies; I had met and mastered some big problems in my time. But when, long after midnight, Dodge pronounced me perfect—if only my memory did not fail me—both he and I were drenched with sweat and shaking with nervous exhaustion.

"Smith," he said, "I believe you'll do what no other outsider has ever dared attempt—break into a secret meeting of the Alphabet. But I tell you, whether you get in or not, you're going to your death. They'll never let you out alive."

"It's your business to get me in," I growled. "I'm not sure that I'll want to get out."

Dodge drew himself up, and for the first time I noted the perfect symmetry and control of the man that had made me think him undersized.

"You'll get in," he repeated between his teeth. "Smith—I'd like to shake hands with you."

I found that the desire was mutual.

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XVII

A SUBDUED but insistent knocking on the outer door of the suite brought us back to the present.

"Smith! Smith!" called a hoarse voice softly. The visitor tried the knob, then set his shoulder against the door. Dodge shifted his revolver into his pocketed left hand, signed to me to be prepared for trouble and opened the door.

Colonel Fairchild, white, stern, alert, stalked into the room and stood silent, shaking with fear and anger, until the door had been closed again and Dodge had left us together.

"Where's my daughter?" he rasped.

"Colonel—Colonel!" I stammered.

"Speak up, man! Where's Virginia? I'm going to kill you, but you'll talk first! What have you done with her?"

"They kidnaped her!"

"Kidnaped? Nonsense! Who kidnaped her? Who's 'they'?"

"I don't know."

"You lie! You've got her here! You sneaking snake in the grass!"

He towered above me with his heavy stick uplifted, and I expected each moment to feel the blow. I made no attempt to defend myself, for I felt that I deserved greater punishment than even his rage could wreak upon me. But my grim face and utter carelessness of consequences must have convinced him of my honesty, for he changed from threats to pleading.

"For God's sake, Smith, what has happened?"

Gently I forced the shaken old man into the easy chair and gave him brandy. Then, as tenderly as I could, I told him of Virginia's disappearance, and of my fruitless search for her. But I did not tell him how I had seen her later.

"Kidnaped? My little Jinny kidnaped?" The Colonel seemed to age visibly as the fact impressed itself upon his dazed mind. "Why did you wait so long to tell me, sir? Smith, it looks suspicious!"

"What could you do, sir, that I haven't done?"

"Notify the police!"

I laughed bitterly.

"You don't mean that, sir. You know as well as I do how useless the police are in such a case."

"But what shall we do? What can we do?" The old soldier paced the floor in his agony, grinding his clenched hands together with a dry rasping sound. "There must be something we can do!"

"I hope to learn something tonight——"

"Tonight! Tonight may be a thousand years too late!'

"I don't think——"

"You think, think, think! What do you *know* about it? My poor little Jinny!"

"You think I had a hand in it, sir?"

The Colonel raised his bloodshot eyes to glare at me.

"I think you are a coward, sir—and a fool! If I thought anything else, I'd choke you with your red beard."

I heard some one fling open the outer door and dash out into the hall, and I caught the echo of the elevator gate. Revolver in hand, I flung the portières aside and followed, with a faint realization that the Colonel had tried to stop me. Dodge, with his revolver ready, stood before the door to the elevator shaft, peering down.

"I might get him on a carom off the wall," he said as quietly as if he were bending over a billiard table, "but I'd probably only rouse the house."

"Who was it?"

"The crippled beggar. He ran like a deer."

"Why didn't you shoot?"

"I'm after bigger game."

"What was he doing?"

"Shoving something under the door."

A startled exclamation sent us hurrying back to the Colonel. He was standing in the doorway, holding a letter in his hand.

"It's addressed to me," he said, looking suspiciously from one to the other of us. "How did it get here?"

I told him and hurried him into the living-room, leaving Dodge, all ears, behind the portière.

"Open it carefully," I suggested as he snatched up a paper knife. "It may give us some clue."

I suffered a thousand agonies of doubt and fear while the old man's shaking fingers blundered over the simple task; but at last he had slit the flap, and exposed the contents. This was a single sheet of paper, scrawled all over with large irregular writing that showed evidence of haste; but so far as I could determine, there was no attempt to disguise the hand.

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At sight of the opening words, the Colonel cursed bitterly; then, after several futile attempts to read further, he thrust the paper at me.

"Read it out, Smith. I can't see in this —— light."

I read it slowly, both because the light bothered my eyes, and because I wanted Dodge to hear:

COLONEL FAIRCHILD:

Read and tremble! Your daughter Virginia is at our mercy. As you use us, so we will use her. Now, listen!

Knock the bottom out of Petroleum Central, and keep on knocking till we tell you to stop. We'll give you forty-eight hours to get it twenty points below this morning's opening price. If it goes up —pray for Virginia!

Do just as we tell you, and if you're lucky with the market we'll return Virginia at the end of forty-eight hours absolutely unharmed. If you refuse, or fail, or try to catch us, you'll get Virginia back—but you'll wish we'd killed her.

Don't try to answer—act! We'll know what you're doing as soon as you know yourself. Tremble and obey! Or God have mercy on Virginia, for we have none!

As the last brutal words passed my set lips the Colonel burst into a frenzy of oaths and sobs. I was in little better state, and I thought I heard soft blasphemies from behind the hall portière.

But the Colonel, old and shaken though he was, was too good a soldier to waste time in useless emotion. He stood up, tall and white and composed, and the hand that grasped his stick was as firm as if he were riding at the head of his old regiment.

"Come, Smith, there's work to do!"

"You're going to smash the Pool?"

"The Pool? I'd smash the United States Government if it would help Virginia! Why, —— your doubting soul, do you think I'd save a few miserable dollars and send my girl to perdition?"

I knew by that how hard he was hit, how cruelly torn between his love for his child and his passionate regard for his heretofore unsullied honor. The smashing of Petroleum Central would not only beggar him, but it would make him that most despised of men—the betrayer of his friends.

"I'm ready to do my part, sir," I said quietly.

And together we went out into the waking street, entered the motor car that had brought him, and sped as fast as sixty horses could take us to the field of battle.

THE COLONEL leaned back in his corner—old, broken, communing with himself; but I knew by a certain resilient swing in his figure that he was merely resting on his arms, ready for an immediate call to action.

I sat bolt upright, staring out the window at the filling streets. So the Colonel was going to smash Petroleum Central! It was not so much the loss of money and honor that appalled me; it was the chance, looming bigger the more I thought on it, that even the Colonel, in the brief time allotted him, might not be able to wreck what he had so carefully built up. It was a task for giants; and the Colonel and I, nodding wearily in our respective corners, seemed impotent to cope with it.

As our car stopped under the porte-cochère Mrs. Fairchild broke from the respectful restraint of Briggs and fairly tumbled down the steps into the Colonel's arms. She was weeping hysterically, and hinting wildly at terrible secrets that she did not dare wholly to reveal.

"Is Kemble here?" demanded the Colonel as he half carried his distracted wife up the steps.

"We haven't been able to reach him, sir," answered Briggs from the doorway.

"Any letters? Any message?"

"That crippled beggar——"

"Was he here?" I cried.

"Yes, sir. He insisted on seeing the Colonel, and I sent him to your apartments, sir."

"That explains one mystery," I told the Colonel when we had locked ourselves into the library.

"Open the safe and let's get to work," answered the Colonel gruffly.

I laid before him the papers that held the secrets of Petroleum Central; then he made one last appeal—

"It's my honor or my daughter's."

"Give me till the market opens tomorrow to produce your daughter. The gang won't hold you to the exact hour—they must know that they've asked the impossible."

"And if you fail?"

"My chances are better than yours," I argued. "You know you can't do it in the time allowed you."

"I know it, Smith," he answered gently. "I know it. But it's all that I can do. And perhaps—if I show my good intention—perhaps they will have some mercy, after all."

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"But if I should succeed you will be ruined for nothing. They'll never know the difference if you delay a little."

"What did the letter say? They'll know what I'm doing as soon as I know myself. I don't dare delay."

He turned the papers aimlessly, staring at them with unseeing eyes.

"There's one thing you ought to know, Smith. It's a family secret—but it may have some bearing on what had happened. Virginia is not my own child. She's the daughter of an old friend—a Captain in my regiment. He was one of the best soldiers I ever knew; but he served his country better than he did his family. He had learned wild ways in the army, and he didn't last long after he returned to the ways of peace.

"I formally adopted Virginia when I took her—gave her my own name, and cherished her as if she were my own. I couldn't think any more of her if she were my own, and I don't think she could love me any more. It's been years since I even thought of her real parentage. I've been afraid sometimes—lately—that Virginia was changing somehow; that perhaps she was showing some of her father's traits. Do you think it possible, Smith, after so many years?"

What could I say? He had given me new cause to put the worst interpretation upon Virginia's incomprehensible actions.

There was a knock at the door and I admitted Kemble. He was as immaculately dressed as usual, but there was about him an air of suppressed excitement and covert watchfulness that struck me as strange, even under the circumstances.

"You've heard?" asked the Colonel.

"Briggs tells me Virginia is missing. What does it mean?"

"Here's the best explanation." And I thrust the blackmailing letter into his hand. Kemble took the paper, but eyed me with cold contempt.

"Is this all *you* have to say for yourself?" he sneered.

"I suppose if you had been here to protect Miss Fairchild, things might be different," I retorted hotly.

"I certainly should not have trusted her to your escort," he answered coldly, and read the letter through without comment. "What are you going to do—wreck the market as they demand?"

The Colonel threw out his shaking impotent hands.

"What else *is* there to do?"

"You might put the thumbscrews on your impeccable secretary and learn what he really knows about the affair."

"I don't know any more than you do," I retorted.

"You must know something about it! You are either a knave or a coward—there are no two ways about it."

"Smith has offered to restore Virginia tomorrow morning," said the Colonel half-heartedly.

"For how much?"

"Suppose," I suggested dryly, "instead of accusing me you tell us what you would do! You showed yourself very clever, I remember, in devising schemes for the Vice Commission."

"That's right!" cried the Colonel eagerly. "For God's sake, Harry, put your brain to work. I don't know where you and Virginia stand——"

"We were just about to ask your consent to our engagement, sir," said Kemble quietly. "I'd have done it weeks ago but Virginia wasn't quite ready. As for plans—I'll guarantee to have Virginia safe in your arms by this time tomorrow morning."

"God bless you, Harry!" stammered the Colonel brokenly, taking the promise for the deed. "I knew we could depend upon you."

"Then we won't need to smash the Pool," I suggested with an appearance of relief that I did not feel.

The Colonel glanced at Kemble, who was looking at me. The society leader shook his head slowly, as if making up his mind; but his glance showed me that his advice was prearranged.

"I'm afraid that won't do. You must at least make the start, or you may balk my plans."

"And what are your plans?" I asked eagerly. "Can't I help? I had an idea of my own—— "

"You?"

"Perhaps you could work together!" cried the Colonel happily.

"I couldn't work with a man I don't trust," answered Kemble shortly, and turned his back upon me so determinedly that he did not detect my grin. "Colonel, I have a difficult task before me—probably a dangerous one. I shall need all the encouragement I can get. May I know that I have your approval of our engagement?"

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"Bring her back to me, Harry!" sobbed the Colonel, putting out both hands. "Only bring my little Jinny back safe, and you shall marry her tomorrow!"

My heart leaped into my throat.

"Does that go for me, too?" I asked boldly.

Kemble dropped the Colonel's hands and turned upon me fiercely.

"You cowardly upstart! Do you think a woman's heart can be won by a melodramatic rescue?"

"I asked the Colonel a question," I said quietly.

The Colonel was staring at me, half angry, half bewildered.

"I am not bartering my daughter's honor, sir. I am trying to save it. Have you any reason to suppose she loves you?"

"No," I replied truthfully.

"You have answered your own question, sir."

XVIII

IN THE smashing of Petroleum Central the Colonel showed himself a very giant of the floor. Never had I seen him so sure, so prescient, so diabolically cunning, so unscrupulous. For once he was playing the game with no thought for the consequences, and I marveled at his skill.

When the market closed for the day, with our gigantic task hardly begun, we were both exhausted. The Colonel dozed off in his chair while I was repeating the last report from the wire; and I flung myself down upon the divan before the fireplace and was asleep before I was comfortable.

I was awakened by angry voices, and with the eavesdropping instinct that had become second nature I lay quiet and listened. The divan faced the fireplace, so that its high back was between me and the speakers, whom I at once recognized as the Colonel and his wife.

The woman was beside herself with shame and terror, and was alternately accusing herself of disgracing her husband and berating him for doing for an adopted daughter what he had refused to do for his own wife. And the poor Colonel, equally distraught, was heaping abuse and scorn on the wife who he believed had betrayed him.

"No, no, Victor! Not that! I'm not that bad!"

"You lie!" raged the Colonel. "A married woman who has a secret with a man is a guilty woman."

"Only foolish, Victor! I swear it!" sobbed Mrs. Fairchild.

"What was in those letters?"

"Nothing, Victor! On my honor! They are just foolish notes from a foolish girl."

"Then why were you afraid to have me see them?"

"I—I was ashamed!"

"Who is the man?"

"I—I don't dare tell you! You'd kill him!"

The Colonel laughed wildly.

"I certainly would! Kill him? No! I'd do better than that! I'd divorce you and make him marry you, with my gun against his head if he refused."

The woman groaned brokenly.

"And you've brought all this sorrow and shame upon me because you were jealous of Virginia! Don't try to deny it! I've seen it growing on you day after day. You were jealous because I loved her, and liked to have her near me—as if I didn't love you, like a silly old fool! You were jealous of Kemble—you, a married woman. Jealous of your daughter's lover! By ——! Is Kemble the man?"

"No, no!" she protested faintly.

"I wish I could believe you. Not that it matters; I've promised Kemble he shall marry her if he brings her back—and I'll keep my word." The Colonel's voice became calmer, but not kinder. "It's peculiar—very—that both you and Kemble should ask the same thing that the blackmailers demand—the wrecking of Petroleum Central. Kemble told me himself that he needed money; and you've bled me for months to buy off some hound who was threatening you. I can't believe it of Harry but—I don't know what to believe of you!"

"I love you!" she murmured wearily. "I love Virginia——"

"Go on!" he jeered. "I suppose you love Kemble, too, and the man who's been blackmailing you!"

"I hate him!"

"Then why won't you let me kill him and end it all?"

"I—believe I—will," she faltered, as if at the end of her strength.

But that would not at all suit my plans. If the man who was tormenting her was the man I thought him, the revelation of his

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name would set the Colonel crazy, without in any way contributing toward Virginia's rescue. Indeed, it might make her rescue impossible.

I moaned and stirred like one awaking from a sound sleep. There was intense silence in the room; then the Colonel snapped on the lights and came softly over to me.

"Smith!" he said quietly.

"Eh! Yes? What is it?" I muttered, rolling over and blinking at him and the light. "Is it tomorrow?"

"You've been asleep?" demanded the Colonel suspiciously.

"I—I guess so." I sat up with a yawn and looked at my watch. "I should say I had!" I sprang to my feet; then at sight of Mrs. Fairchild, standing motionless with her back to us, I turned inquiringly to the Colonel. "Shall I leave you a while, sir?"

"No!" growled the Colonel, evidently convinced against his will by my acting. "Mrs. Fairchild was just about to go." And I knew that he saw, as I did, that the moment for confession had passed.

I was intensely sorry for the Colonel, and tried to divert his mind by getting him to plan for the fatal morrow. But his brain was dull and fagged; his spirit was broken; the very fashion in which his usually stiff mustaches drooped over his mouth showed how weary and heartsick he was. I was glad when he suddenly threw down his pencil and announced his intention of getting some sleep.

As we stood in the library door Kemble came briskly down the front stairs, and I saw the Colonel's white face go whiter and his trembling hands clench into firmness.

"What were you doing upstairs, sir?" was his brusk question.

Kemble stopped his descent—surprised but not agitated.

"I have just come from Mrs. Fairchild. I thought she might know why Virginia was so anxious to attend the meeting last night."

"She was always interested in the work of the Commission," said the Colonel coldly. "Did Mrs. Fairchild see you?"

"Just for a moment. But she could tell me nothing."

"Why don't you question Smith here? He saw Virginia last."

"I don't trust Smith."

"And I don't trust any one—not even you, Kemble. There's something underlying all this trouble that makes me suspicious of those to whom I should naturally turn for help."

"You don't trust me?" repeated Kemble slowly, as if the idea were new to him.

"No! I'm a fool even to warn you!"

"I suppose I can thank Smith for that."

"You can thank yourself. Good night!"

The Colonel pushed rudely by him up the stairs leaving Kemble trying unsuccessfully to hide the flush on his face, while I made no attempt to conceal my grin.

"Come into the library!" he ordered shortly; and little as I liked his tone I followed him willingly. "Smith, I've warned you before to keep out of my affairs. I warn you again for the last time."

"Correct!" I answered blithely. "It's the very last time that I shall take an insult from you, so do your best while you have the chance."

"What do you mean?" he asked, showing neither anger nor alarm, but watching me carefully with his big, brilliant eyes.

"I mean trouble!" I snarled, thrusting my chin forward pugnaciously. "If you'll go with me now to the Colonel and confess, I'll do my best to help you clear things up so the innocent shall no longer suffer. If you refuse——"

"Confess? What have I to confess?"

"You might begin by explaining what hold you have on Mrs. Fairchild—" his eyes sparkled at that—"and why you took Miss Fairchild to the Soubrette."

He shrugged his shoulders to hide his start.

"A dog baying at the moon!" he sneered. "I wish you sweet dreams, Mr. Secretary Smith—you seem to prefer them to facts."

I put myself between him and the door, and held him for my last word.

"I'm giving you this chance, Kemble, because it will make things easier for the others. Don't misunderstand me—I'm not thinking of you."

"So kind of you!" he murmured suavely, and bowed himself out with his courtliest air.

I WAS in the street almost as soon as he was, and observed with satisfaction that he did not intend to take a cab. At first I followed him guardedly; but when I saw that he did not suspect that he was spied upon I worked closer.

We traversed several blocks, tending in the general direction of the Strip, and gradually leaving behind us the better lighted

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and more frequented thoroughfares. Here I must be more circumspect, for there were so few people abroad that the addition of even one was noticeable. Reluctantly I fell back to what seemed a safe distance.

And then I lost him. Turning a dark corner I found only an empty street. Frantic with disappointment and anger I beat futilely about the neighborhood for perhaps half an hour. There were a hundred hiding-places, a score of ways by which he could have given me the slip. Finally common-sense reasserted itself, and I realized that I had had no definite idea in following Kemble and probably should have learned nothing had I shadowed him further. Thus consoling myself I turned homeward.

I was reentering the better-lighted district when I saw coming toward me a figure that somehow seemed familiar. It was that of a man with commanding presence, shrouded in a long, loose motor-coat, and wearing motor cap and goggles. As he drew nearer my heart sickened, then leaped madly, as I recognized unmistakably the "chief" of the three who had tortured me in the house on Queer Street. I stepped into the doorway of a store whose windows permitted me to watch the approaching figure.

A covered touring-car started quickly from its stand farther up the street and came bowling toward us. It stopped when abreast of the chief; the chauffeur hailed him, and he turned with evident reluctance to answer the summons. As he did so the car door flew open and into the street stepped Virginia. There was no mistaking the indescribably graceful figure and the white-plumed hat.

I dropped my hand to my revolver and took a step toward the street, then stopped. This man was undoubtedly the one who had directed my torture; but he might also be the stranger with whom I had seen Virginia at the Soubrette, and in the taxicab—that is to say, a friend of hers. Certainly, in this instance at least, Virginia had voluntarily sought his company; and if he were her friend, whatever his character, she would resent any interference from me. Thus once again I found myself tied hand and foot.

Meanwhile the two were engaged in a discussion that appeared to become more acrimonious with each moment. The girl seemed to be urging the man to get into the cab with her, and he was showing a surly unwillingness to oblige her.

Finally he snapped an order at the chauffeur, pushed Virginia roughly into the vehicle and followed her with an angry slam of the door. The driver threw in the clutch and the car came toward me, picking up speed at every revolution of its wheels.

I looked eagerly about for a taxicab. There was not even a horse-drawn vehicle in sight; nor, I realized quickly, was there much chance of finding one in that neighborhood. As the car whirred past me I noted its every detail of construction with an eye that sought for miracles. Desperation flashed me an inspiration, and I accepted the long chance as a favor from the gods.

I sprinted after the quickly moving vehicle, caught hold of a projecting knob, and swung myself cautiously up behind. Instinctively my hands found and grasped the bosses that composed the elbows for the adjustment of the top; my feet dropped upon the jerking footholds offered by the backward extension of the great springs that took the weight of the body. Thus I crouched, spreadeagled against the back of the lurching automobile.

It was no easy matter to hold my position. The car was traveling at a good speed, and was swinging from side to side of the street in an attempt to dodge the worst pitfalls in the long-neglected paving. More than once my feet slipped from the sloping, bounding springs, and my nails broke into the quick as I clutched at the bobbing bosses.

The one advantage of my position was that I could see distinctly what passed in the interior of the car. My face was perforce pressed against the glass set in the back of the top, and an electric bulb on either side gave me ample light. But I could hear nothing save my own gasping breath and the strenuous beating in my temples.

The quarrel was still going on, and Virginia was scolding her companion with a virulence that amazed and saddened me. There were hard lines about her mouth; her eyes flashed hate and anger, and her clenched hands lifted often in a threatening gesture. The man was cooler but, I judged, no less angry; though he was so muffled up that I could see nothing of his face.

With a triumphant gesture Virginia drew

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from her sleeve and flaunted before her companion a long black silk glove, strangely large for a woman. Her attitude was so indicative of jealousy that I could almost hear her taunting—

"Then how do you explain this?"

For a moment the man appeared startled; then he threw back his head and laughed so loudly that I caught the sound above the rattle and jar of the car.

Virginia stared at him through eyes that were flaming slits. The hand that held the glove, suddenly emptied, stole to her bosom. There was a flash of light, an intercepted blow, and the two were struggling desperately for the possession of the thin shining bit of steel that Virginia had attempted to use.

There was no time for me to interfere if I had had the wit. All the brute in the man was roused, mad with the blood lust, and he had no thought for the sex or helplessness of his opponent. He caught her by the throat and choked her into impassivity.

Finger by finger he loosed her grip upon the handle of the stiletto, seeming to take a brutal delight in drawing out her agony. But once possessed of the weapon he struck so quickly that I did not know what had happened till I saw the hilt protruding from Virginia's breast, and the crimson flood of life darkening her garments.

Whether the shock or the uneven road threw me, I do not know, but I found myself on my feet in the middle of the street, staggering after the car, and striving in vain to make my paralyzed throat sound the alarm.

A block away the car stopped with a sharp grinding of brakes. The chief leaped out and dashed down an alleyway, deaf to the shouts of the chauffeur. It was a street of warehouses, now dark and deserted; and when I staggered up the chauffeur had returned from his half-hearted pursuit and was silent, staring with dismay and fear into the interior of his vehicle.

I PUSHED him out of my way and clambered in beside Virginia. She lay back against the cushions with the terror of death still in her staring eyes. The prints of the murderer's fingers were blackening on her white throat. It was useless to search her limp wrist for a fluttering pulse, or hold my watch-crystal before her lips to detect the moisture of her breath. Though I did both I acted automatically, and with no hope of discovering a flicker of life. I had seen the weapon driven home, deep into the heart itself.

"Did he croak her?" asked the chauffeur in a shaky whisper.

I nodded shortly and motioned him to stand back. Perhaps he guessed that I had more than a passing interest in his murdered fare, for he withdrew a few feet, though he kept a sharp watch upon me.

Numbly I closed the lids over the wild eyes. I drew the stiletto from the wound, and stanched the flowing blood with the black glove. Finally I settled the still figure in the easiest position possible, bound its arm through one of the straps that it might not be shaken from its place and snapped out the inside lights. The chauffeur, noting my preparations, edged nearer.

"What you doing that for?" he demanded.

"I want you to take her——"

"I'm going to take her to the nearest police station," he interrupted fiercely. "This puts me in a —— of a mess, and I ain't going no deeper for nobody."

On a chance I drew from my pocket the token of the Red Alphabet, and was immeasurably relieved to see his instant recognition of it. He did not know the murdered girl, he told me. He had driven her several times before, with this man and others, but he had never heard her called anything but Rosalie. It just happened to be his turn to go out tonight when she telephoned for the big touring-car. He had picked her up at a drug-store and driven her around for a bit till she saw that bloody murderer; and that was all he knew about it, "so help me!"

"You do just as I say, my man, and you'll never have a minute's trouble over this. Besides that, you'll be the richer by five hundred dollars."

He gasped an incredulous oath, and I counted a hundred crackling dollars into his trembling palm.

"I think you can trust me a day or two for the balance?"

"Sure!" he assented, eagerly counting and recounting the yellow-backed bills. "What's the office?"

"Just keep driving around this neighborhood. If any one signals you, tell him he's made a mistake. If he tells you he's Dodge, do just as he says. Get that?"

"Where you going?" he asked suspiciously.

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"After the murderer."

"I ain't no hearse-driver!" muttered the man, with a fearful glance at his darkened car. I let the token gleam in my palm again.

"All right," he agreed sullenly; then as if to make amends, "You know Harley's pool-room in Tulane Street?"

"Yes," I said with a start.

"That's where he told me to take 'em."

"Thanks! You won't regret giving me that tip."

"I hope I don't. It's hard enough for an honest man to make a living without being drawed into this kind o' game."

He cranked his engine, reluctantly climbed into his seat and started slowly away, driving with a care that showed that he could not keep his mind from what he carried. I watched him with smarting eyes that would have been eased by the tears that I could not shed. The car lurched over an uneven crossing, and through the little glass in the rear I caught a glimpse of a tossing white plume.

XIX

DODGE the obsequious servant answered my telephone call; but at my broken, "They've killed Virginia!" he became at once the cool and wily plotter. He agreed to do his part with secrecy and dispatch, but he did not at all like my idea of a personal pursuit of the murderer.

"You'll only get yourself in trouble by running him down alone," he insisted.

"I'm going to do more than run him down," I answered. "I'm going to kill him."

"You're a fool!" growled Dodge.

"Then there's two of us!" I retorted. "You told me once that you were living for revenge. It's all I've got to live for now. Can I depend upon you?"

"Absolutely!"

"If I don't come back—tell the Colonel as gently as you can. And, for Heaven's sake, Dodge, hurry and stop that poor lost soul wandering about the streets!"

There was, indeed, nothing left for me but revenge; and that I felt to be a sacred duty which could not be delegated to others. My love for Virginia throbbed higher than ever before, but it was love for the Virginia who might have been, the pure bright soul that was deathless; it was no longer a source of sorrow, but of joy. I went about my planning with a calmness and craftiness that were by no means natural. And I was conscious of an utter lack of personal fear, and a complete confidence in my ability to do what I attempted, that made me capable of incredible things. I think I was absolutely mad for a time; no other theory will account for my actions or my desperation.

It was nearly nine when I reached Harley's pool room. Harley himself, in shirt sleeves and advertising cap, was nodding over his pipe behind his little show case. The pool room door stood half open, and the place was dim, silent and deserted.

The jangling shop bell aroused Harley, who scowled at me inquiringly; then I saw recognition and suspicion dawning in his face.

"What you doing here?" he demanded.

"Has the man in the motor rig been here?"

"There ain't nobody been here since you tried to hang that murder on me. I ain't making enough to pay my rent."

"That's a lie, Harley," I said quietly, and with utter disregard for his threatening attitude. "Blackmail's your trade, and business is brisk. The man I'm after was bringing a girl here. What became of him?"

Harley eyed me with undisguised hate and fear, and I knew that only my evident contempt of him held him from open violence; for he took it to mean that I had come with the police at my back. He motioned toward the pool room.

"They's a feller in there may know something. He's the only one been here tonight."

I pushed the pool room door wide open, strode into the rank smelling place and turned the gas light up into a full blaze.

Sprawled on three chairs, with his coat rolled under his head for a pillow and his stock of shoe-strings dragging on the floor, was the crippled beggar. Apparently he was fast asleep and snoring, but I greatly doubted whether he had not heard all that had passed since I entered the shop.

I kicked at the leg that dangled over the chair, and so roused him. He sat up with a snarling oath, carefully wiped the shoestrings on his trousers, and made as if to move on. Then realizing that he was not sleeping on a park bench, and recognizing me, he began to grin evilly.

"What you want?" he growled.

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"Where's the man in the motor coat?"

"Don't know the guy."

"Cut that!" I snapped. "He was coming here, and I know you're mixed up with him in this Fairchild kidnaping. Where'll I find him?"

"What you want of him?"

"That's my business."

"Aw, go to ——!" he muttered, and he lay back on the chairs as if to continue his slumbers, though he kept his blurred eyes on me.

I pulled back my coat to show my special officer's badge.

"You know me, Limpy; you know what I've got behind me. We've got the goods on you, but we want the man higher up. You can take your choice. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll give you a chance to get out; otherwise I'll take you along with me now. Perhaps the police can make you tell."

"Police!" he sneered. "You're more scared of them than I am. But I s'pose I might as well tell you—it won't do you no good. Know that boarding house on the avenue, near Automobile Row?"

I started. There was only one such house in that locality, and that was Alpha House, the meeting-place of the Red Alphabet, to which Dodge had already directed me.

"I see you know it," grinned Limpy. "You'll probably find your man there about midnight if you've got the nerve to try."

"I think I have as much nerve as I'll need," I said stiffly.

"But you'll have to go alone," he sneered. "If you bring a herd of bulls, there'll be nothing doing."

"Let me give you a tip, Limpy. Get out of this town as fast as your game leg will take you, or turn State's evidence when you're caught. Somebody's going to get hurt when we give this kidnaping case to the police."

"Good night!" he sneered, and settled himself as comfortably as possible on his improvised bed.

I tossed him a bill, walked silently past the glowering Harley, and made my way to the nearest taxicab stand. For half an hour I had myself driven slowly through the deserted streets adjacent to the scene of the murder, but without avail. Mine was the only cab in all those silent ways, and I must believe that Dodge had already found the wandering car that bore Virginia's body. I dared not make inquiries, for secrecy was imperative.

Virginia's death had not altered my determination to invade the secret meeting-place of the Alphabet. Despite Dodge's conviction that A had had no hand in the kidnaping, I was sure that the Alphabet was in some way at the bottom of the whole affair. And the hope that I should find the murderer in that secret stronghold of infamy gave me a stronger reason for making the attempt.

My Transom Court chambers were silent and empty; but Dodge had left me a cold lunch and laid out my evening clothes. Conventional black was the basis of the Alphabet's disguise. As I dressed I discovered that one side of my body had been bruised by my fall from the back of the automobile, and that there was a lump on my head; my bones were intact, however, and once I had dressed and eaten I felt ready for the approaching ordeal.

All the time—in fact, ever since I left Harley's—I had been going over and over the complex rigmarole that was to gain me admittance to Alpha House. Absurd as much of the jargon was, I knew that any slip on my part would end abruptly my attempt at retribution; and I was gravely pleased to find that I was letter-perfect in all that Dodge had taught me.

I provided myself with two automatic revolvers and sufficient cartridges for reloading, and slipped into an improvised sheath the stiletto that had killed Virginia; for I had a mind to make that weapon's second deed avenge its first. I discarded my big spectacles, which might make trouble for me if I got into a fight; and almost as an afterthought, I secreted upon me a small but powerful electric flashlight, and a pair of nippers.

Then, donning top hat and top-coat, I took a farewell look through the apartments that had been so strange a home to me, and locked the door behind me for the last time. I gave the elevator boy a tip that dumfounded him, both by its amount and its unexpectedness. Having thus wound up the affairs of John Smith, I set out on foot in the direction of Alpha House, timing myself to reach there after eleven-thirty. I was retracing, in thought and in body, the trail which had been blazed for me, not so long before, by Virginia's tossing white plume.

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A CITY, like a tree, marks its growth by concentric rings.. These rings, cross-sectioned, give a stratified effect to the street that cuts them, and so produce strange contrasts. The city infested by the Red Alphabet is full of such contrasts; but nowhere are they more noticeable than on the Avenue. Here business is invading the precincts formerly sacred to the homes of fashion; and houses once famous for their hospitality have degenerated into gaunt boarding-houses, or disappeared forever.

One of the survivors, located between the huge Fosdick Building and the beginning of Automobile Row, bore upon its front a blurred sign which announced:

PRIVATE BOARDING
FOR MEN ONLY

The sign was old and worn and shabby by years of service; but the house itself offered unusual attractions to the homeless city man. It stood on its own grounds, with a patch of grass, a flower bed, and a thicket of low evergreen trees before it; it was well kept up; and its wide deep windows gave promise of "large airy rooms" in truth as well as in advertisement. Many men ascended the front steps, rang the electric bell, and endeavored to secure rooms in the house; but the invariable reply was that there were no vacancies.

If this ever full boarding-house had been surrounded by others of its kind, it might have been something of a mystery to its neighbors. In the first place, upon its lintel were carved the Greek letters A—Ω Though now hardly decipherable, they looked fresher than the surface of the weather-beaten stone, and had evidently been out some time after the house was built. Indeed, old residents asserted that the letters and the "Private Boarding" sign had appeared simultaneously.

Then the inmates of the house were most irregular in their habits and had a liking for coming in at queer hours, and then by way of the alley gate. They had a liking, too, for heavy curtains that were always closely drawn; and they never permitted a stranger to catch even a glimpse of the interior. But as they were never noisy or objectionable in any way the busy occupants of the adjacent buildings gave them little thought.

The one actual nuisance about the place was a huge advertising clock which stood just inside the front gate. It consisted of a square bronze top, about three feet in diameter, set upon an ornamental bronze pedestal that lifted it higher than a man's head. The four vertical sides of the cube held illuminated clock dials, though the insertion of a dial in the side facing the house seemed somewhat suggestive, since the original purpose of the clock had been to advertise a cheap whisky. The advertisement had long since disappeared, licked up by the thirsty elements; but nightly the great clock turned its glowing faces to the four winds and wrought upon the nerves of those who trusted it as might the ardent liquor which it once had heralded.

For the clock kept no time known to any other chronometer in the world. By day it seemed to slumber, and its hands seldom moved. But at night it roused itself to crazy activity and whirled its hands about as if to make up for lost time. Yet never, so some maintained, had it been known to indicate the correct hour; but since there is no law requiring a clock to be sober and industrious, the great dials continued to put a bold and shining face upon a palpable lie.

As I approached Alpha House I kept my eye upon this abandoned clock-face. It brazenly asserted the hour to be twelve-twenty, though I knew that it was in fact almost an hour earlier than that. I stopped a few doors away, apparently caught by the display in the still lighted windows of Automobile Row; but really I was watching the clock.

For this mysterious timepiece was the block signal on the way to Alpha House. One of the strictest rules of the organization was that its members should never know with whom they held council. To insure anonymity, no man might enter or leave the house until his immediate predecessor had had five minutes start of him, either to assume his disguise, or to make his "get-away." The clock, which lied so brazenly to the unsophisticated, told me that five members of Alpha were already within, and warned me not to attempt to enter till I was signaled.

For several minutes I waited, while the long minute hand clung tenaciously to the figure 4. Then it leaped the gap to the 5; and, with quickened heartbeat, I resumed my interrupted stroll. The fifth Letter had

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passed the outer guards, and I purposed to be the sixth. I passed by the open front gate, turned down the alley that ran along the side of the house and cautiously made my way over the broken pavement.

The alley was very narrow and very dark. No light broke the looming side of the Fosdick Building, or lessened the gloom that hung over Alpha House. The very door which I sought was so deep in the shadow that I found it only by feeling for it. There was not even a step to stumble over.

I gripped my hidden revolver with my right hand, and with my left knocked upon the door—six soft measured strokes.

XX

THE door swung silently inward on well-oiled hinges, and I took six blind paces into a stuffy, impenetrable darkness.

The door closed behind me with a soft click. A pencil of light shot through the dark about on the level of my waist, and a black-gloved hand, palm upward, appeared suddenly in the shining ray.

I laid my Greek-lettered token on the extended palm. The disembodied fingers turned the thing about, playing the light upon its every detail, but keeping the sphere of illumination always on the same level, so that neither the guard nor I learned aught of the appearance of the other.

Then the light went as quickly as it came, the token slid back into my waiting hand, and six soft finger-taps on my palm told me that I had passed the first guard.

A hand gripped my wrist. Obedient to its silent guidance I traversed a narrow and twisting hall, black as the entryway I had left and so heavily carpeted that our going made no sound.

When we stopped, still in the pitch dark, I had an impression that I was in a room of some size and that there were others present besides my guide. A voice came to me out of the dark—several voices, perhaps—from different parts of the room, strangely muffled; and, as I had been coached by Dodge, I gave my answers to their cryptic questions.

"Who comes?" boomed the voice.

"The postman."

"What do you bring?"

"Two letters."

"Who sends them?"

"Alpha and Omega."

"How are they written?"

"In red and black."

"What is their message?"

"Blood and death."

"Pass on, postman, and deliver your letters."

But I did not move; for to move would have been to die.

Presently hands were laid upon me, working skilfully and swiftly in the dark. My top hat and overcoat were taken from me, and a tap on the hand caused me to remove my gloves and surrender them to an unseen valet. I was given other gloves—long feminine gantlets, silk by the feeling, and with no opening at the wrists. These I drew on, pulling the long tops up to cover my forearms.

Then a muffling fabric was drawn down over my head and shoulders, and I felt a momentary sense of suffocation while my invisible valet deftly invested me with what I knew to be the "shroud." Lastly a peculiarly-shaped bit of metal was thrust into my hand, and I was gently pulled about to face in a certain direction.

"Pass on, postman, and deliver your letters," said a muffled voice behind me, and the room leaped into light.

So far as I could see I was alone; and I was too well advised to look behind me. On either side of me were tall lockers, each with a differently shaped bit of metal attached to the door. Straight before me, covered by heavy black curtains, was a wide doorway.

Knowing that I was watched by unseen eyes, I carelessly pocketed the check for my outer garments and clasped my hands before me, palms thrust outward as much as possible. Then I pushed the curtains aside, turned to my left, and walked easily down a narrow but well-lighted passageway.

Another turn brought me face to face with a huge guard, masked and shrouded like myself, who was evidently awaiting me. From the unmistakable taint in the air I guessed him to be a negro; and his build and carriage made me think that he might be not unfamiliar with the prize-ring.

He stood under a brilliant light, blocking the way with his huge body, holding his left hand toward me, palm outward, in the Indian sign for peace. On a shelf against the wall above his head was a miscellaneous collection of lethal weapons that would have

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been a credit to a police-station "morgue." On the other wall, within easy reach, was a small switchboard provided with numbered plugs, and an indicator numbered to correspond. Attached to it was a telephone.

"One?" he demanded, and even the monosyllable told me that I had guessed his race.

"The token," I responded.

"Two?"

"The postman."

"Three?"

"The shroud."

"All right, boss," he laughed gutturally, lapsing into his racial chatter with evident relief. "Stick up your hands and let's see what you got."

Obediently I put my clasped hands high above my head and kept them there, while he went swiftly through me for weapons. He chuckled happily as he discovered in turn the two revolvers, the stiletto, the nippers and the electric torch.

"How many times I got to tell you, boss, you can't tote that hardware into Alpha?"

With the air of a mother confiscating forbidden sweets he added my weapons to the collection on the shelf above his head; but he hesitated over the nippers and torch.

"I guess you won't git much chance to use them here," he chuckled, and returned them to my pockets.

He plugged Number Six on the switchboard, waited till he received an answering flash on the indicator, and then waved me ahead.

"All right, boss. That's your number."

The second turn from the negro brought me upon two slim, masked figures, with left hands extended to bar my way and right hands gripping long, keen stilettos. Their eyes, keen as their bare blades, seemed to flash through their masks; and their lithe figures were poised like panthers for the fatal spring. Italians, these, I decided, and wondered at the devilish cunning by which the Alphabet made use of the worst traits of diverse races.

"Who comes?" challenged Guard Four.

"A letter."

"Which?" asked Guard Five.

"One of the Alphabet."

"Your message?"

"Blood and death."

"Where do you go?" alternated Five.

"To Alpha."

"Know you what the spy or the traitor finds in Alpha?"

"Death."

"The bungler or the unruly?"

"Death."

"Then what seek you?"

"Alpha."

"Know you the way?"

"It goes down."

"What are the six red letters?" demanded Four.

If I hesitated they did not detect it. The letters were six of the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet; the catch lay not so much in the omission as in the order in which we three gave them. If I spoke out of turn those shining nervous stilettos would find my heart before I could correct myself.

"Alpha," I began.

"Eta," said Five.

"Iota," added Four.

"Omicron," from me.

"Upsilon," from Four.

"Omega," finished Five.

Four, without moving from his station, gave and received the necessary signal; and Five added—

"Pass, Letter, into the Alphabet."

The bright blades rose and fell in salute, the two masked figures stepped aside; and I passed on, unscathed as yet.

THE way went "down," in truth; there were no steps, but the slope of the floor was unmistakable. It wound around and around, bearing always to the left, so that it was as if I were following the threads of a great screw.

This similarity became more noticeable as I proceeded, for the sharp corners rounded gradually into smooth turns that finally lost themselves imperceptibly, and I found myself going around and around a perfect circle. The walls and ceiling and heavy floor-covering were of the same dead black; and every now and then I came upon a pair of heavy black curtains that fell down from the ceiling to the floor.

It was easy to guess the purpose of this winding way and its curtain barriers. No sound could follow these frequent turns, or penetrate these heavy hangings; whatever happened below or above could be known at the other end only through the medium of the telephone. Only a knowledge of the "crooks' ritual" could get an intruder past the outer guards into this seemingly interminable descent to Avernus; and as for getting out—I laughed into the dully echoing

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passage at the absurdity of the thought. Then I elbowed my way through another pair of curtains, and stopped.

Before me, swinging away on either side, was a narrow circular passage formed by the wall behind and a series of curtains in front. Facing me, with one hand on the key of a telegraph instrument and the other extended to bar my way, was a huge misshapen figure, masked and garbed in dead black.

This was the inner guard—a full-blooded African of the lowest, most bestial type. His massive head hung forward as if his neck were too weak for it, swinging from side to side with the motion seen in a lion captured in his African jungles. His great shoulders sloped forward, and his long sinewy arms dropped his hands their full length below his knees. He was the very prototype of the man-ape—the fabled man-eating gorilla of his native land.

Not only was he guard but Lord High Executioner, doer of any hideous deed that his white masters commanded. It was said that the anguish of his victims was to him a spectacle of joy, and warm human blood the sweetest drink. For Nature, as if to set the eternal stamp of the man-beast upon him, had sealed his tongue and ears and made him deaf and dumb from birth. By what necromancy he had been taught some little of the Morse telegraphic code I could only wonder.

While I stood motionless, with my hands clasped helplessly before me, the huge black laboriously tapped off his message to the outer guards, and read their response by putting his finger between the chattering points. Then satisfied, he stepped aside and waved me on.

I pushed through the curtains before me and entered boldly into the secret meeting-place of Alpha.

THIS chamber was sunk deep beneath the cellar of the house, walled thick with concrete, and sound-proofed with velvet rugs and hangings, It was an echoless chamber—no sound from without could penetrate its silence; no outcry within could be heard beyond its black curtains; sounds created there were muffled and stifled for want of a sounding-board. It was a chamber suited for dark plots, for agonizing tortures, for bloody deaths. It would have been no surprise to find the air heavy with the smell of fresh blood; instead it held a commonplace odor of tobacco, with a suggestion of garlic.

About the hexagonal table that occupied the exact center of the six-sided room sat five men in conventional evening dress, except that they were gloved and "shrouded."

The shroud was a curious contrivance of black silk. The upper half was stiffened into a cylindrical flat-topped cap, much like the crown of an opera hat, which touched the nose tip and ear lobes of the wearer; the lower part formed a flowing curtain which fell to his shoulders. The eye slits were set with fine silk veiling, also black, which permitted the wearer to see, but which effectively concealed the shape and color of his eyes. Circular orifices similarly veiled enabled him to hear distinctly, yet gave no clue to his identity through any peculiar formation of his ears. The long gloves covered completely hand, wrist and forearm.

Thus shrouded and gloved a man might have met his most intimate friend and passed unrecognized. No feature, no peculiarly-shaped hand, no odd coloring of flesh or hair could betray him. And any little idiosyncrasies of dress were neutralized by the conventional black.

The five shrouded figures sat in great black chairs, wide-armed and high-backed, that might have been ravaged from some wealthy monastery. But on the back of each chair, where it showed above the head of the occupant, was emblazoned in scarlet not the Christian cross, but a vowel of the Greek alphabet—Alpha, Eta, Iota, Omicron, Upsilon, Omega. And on the wall-panel behind each chair gleamed a corresponding letter, also scarlet.

On the black table lay a black velvet spread like a pall, which bore in its center in living scarlet the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, A—Ω. Above the hexagonal table hung a massive black hexagonal chandelier, wherein six high-powered incandescent bulbs blazed through six scarlet panes of glass. Yet the room lay in a deep shadow, shot through with scarlet where the light was reflected from emblazoned letters and the white shirt-fronts of the men.

Before each man stood an extension desk-telephone—black, like all else in the room; the mouthpiece was fitted with a conical extension in which the speaker could hide the greater part of his lower face, and so

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could talk without fear of being overheard by his table companions.

Other furniture or fittings there were none. The chamber was as empty of useless ornaments as a pauper's grave, and as dismal. The sable hangings swung in unfelt drafts like the trappings of a pall. The red lights shone on mysterious symbols as red as they. The hooded, silk-gloved figures, sunk in the depths of their black chairs, looked through eyes whose keenest glance failed to penetrate their veiled masks.

The whole air of the place and the company was oppressive and threatening. The scarlet suggested the color of bright arterial blood; the black was the conventional sable of mourning and death; the men seemed like some black brotherhood, sworn to dreadful deeds.

This cowled fraternity of crime was the more impressive because of its very lack of formality. The men sprawled comfortably in their great chairs, or lolled upon the table, with an ease and naturalness that showed their faith in the security of their disguise. They were there for business—what business, I did not like to think.

One or two of the shrouded figures looked up to nod me a greeting; and as unconcernedly as if I were seating myself by my own fireside I took the great chair of Iota, the thieves.

XXI

THE man opposite me—whom I took to be X, since he was occupying the chair of Omega—was declaiming eloquently upon the profit and honor that his gang had brought to the Alphabet.

"There's one thing you other Letters seem to forget!" he cried. "We beggars may not bring as big sums into the treasury, but neither do we take as much out for fines and bribes."

"A beggar's first thought is to save his own skin," sneered the figure on the right of X; and I started as I realized that I had heard this voice before.

It was my employer, A. His voice came through the curtain of his shroud with the same muffled tone that it had had when he had talked to me through the curtains at Transom Court. I should have identified him before, for he was occupying the great chair of Alpha; but for the moment I had been too busy getting my bearings to remember the significance of the letter above his head.

X leaned across the table with an aggressive tilt of his black headpiece.

"At least, the beggars are loyal to the Alphabet."

"They don't show it!" snapped F, leader of the gunmen, who sat for Eta at my left. "They haven't given us a lead for weeks."

"Same here," growled O, the blackmailer, at my right.

"We've got our own lays to work," retorted X.

"You must have something big on to keep all your gang so busy," suggested A.

"That's my business!" was the insolent answer. "The rules don't require a Letter to give an account of every job he's working."

"The rules give A the right to call any Letter to account when he's pulling off a big job without giving the other gangs their chance to make their bit. And I demand to know what's doing in Omega!"

X settled himself comfortably in his chair and answered calmly, though he kept his veiled eyes turned toward A.

"We're trying to get a line on your man Smith."

"Who's Smith?" inquired Q, spokesman for the con men.

"You don't mean Fairchild's flip secretary?" asked F.

"But I do," answered X.

F turned his masked face toward the silent A.

"What's the answer?" he demanded.

"Private business," was the surly response.

"Meaning private tips on Petroleum Central!" sneered X. "And the whole Alphabet starving because of Fairchild's Vice Commission. What a chance to make the hoary old hypocrite pay for the trouble he's making us!"

A growl of assent ran around the table.

"Are you talking facts or just guessing?" asked O of X.

"Facts! A is hogging the biggest thing that's been pulled off in the city for a year."

"Not even letting his old gang set in!" snarled Q. Again the others growled their disgust at such selfishness.

"And how many of you yappers are capable of handling such a graft?" snapped A.

"I am!" was X's ready retort.

"Then why didn't you think of it? I'll

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tell you," he continued, when the laughter had subsided. "You did think of it, and you tried to put it over all by yourself, till I blocked your game!"

"That's a lie!" said X with cold deliberation.

"I'll get you for that!" snarled A.

"I hope the getting's good," was the airy retort. "I'm tired of thinking up schemes to add to your personal fortune. The rest of Alpha may be blind, but I think I could put a name to you——"

A chorus of protests interrupted him, for it was a cardinal sin to expose the identity of a Letter.

"You'll never put anything on me—not even a name!" jeered A; but his heavy breathing showed that he had had a fright.

"What I want to know," I said boldly, "is why you chose an outsider like Smith for your spy?"

"Me too," echoed O, who seemed incapable of thinking for himself.

"Because there isn't a crook in the Alphabet with the education to do what he's doing!" snarled A. "Nor one I could trust!"

X burst out laughing.

"And he's wearing the token, at that!"

"How do you know?" cried A. "Is he one of your gang?"

"I frisked him."

A muttered a startled oath, and I suspected that he was beginning to doubt his trusted Smith. But I was chiefly interested in X's admission that he had searched me, for I was beginning to believe that I could "put a name" to X.

"The question is," said F, "how much have you cleaned up on this deal, and when are you going to turn it over?"

A laughed mirthlessly.

"Petroleum Central is on the toboggan, and one more day like this will clean me out."

"What's wrong with your trusty Smith?" jeered X.

"You probably bought him up," retorted A.

"I tried to," was the frank admission, "but he hadn't sense enough to accept."

The other crooks laughed in grim appreciation of the jest.

"Then there's nothing coming to the Alphabet?" persisted O, the man of the one idea.

"There'll be a bill, if you want to get in on that!" snarled A. "I tell you, all of you, this is no time for us to quarrel. This Vice Commission means business, and it's got the goods. And that man, Fairchild, is just crazy enough to put us all on the blink."

"Let's get him," suggested Q.

"I believe the fool's honest."

"Give me the office and we'll take care of him," said F with brutal directness.

"You'd only make him a martyr, and then the whole city would butt into the reform game."

"Leave it to Omicron," said O, suddenly delivering himself of an idea. "Every man's got something he'd like to hide."

"You ought to got after that months ago," snapped A. "There's no time now."

"Why didn't you say so before?" flared O. "You've been stalling and stalling—telling us he was just making a grand-stand play."

"Nothing for it but the strong arm," urged F, and a growl of assent voiced the temper of the others.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" protested X suavely. "There's no need for anything so coarse. You forget that you can always depend on the despised beggars in time of need." And he tossed on the table a sealed packet.

"Letters!" whispered O excitedly, and snatched at the bundle with fearsome eagerness.

WITH professional deftness the blackmailer whipped off the wrappings and disclosed a dozen or more notes, still in their original envelopes. As he ran through them, I, sitting next to him, could see that the writing was delicate and undoubtedly feminine; and I caught a whiff of perfume that I seemed to know.

I leaned back in my chair, sick at heart. Was this some final proof of Virginia's unhappy past, risen as from the grave to add another stain to her memory? Or was it the mere accident of the scent of a similar perfume that made me think of her?

"Love letters!" whispered O. "They're mild, but they's plenty of mush in 'em, and I guess they'll do. Who's 'Gene?' "

"The present Mrs. Fairchild," announced X, and my heart leaped.

"And 'Hal'? "

"Harrison Kemble, the society chap."

"Fine!" chuckled O. "We'll get his goat, too—he's been butting into this vice thing." He carefully replaced the letters in their wrapping, and swung his veiled eyes about

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the table. "Give me twenty-four hours——"

I sprang to my feet, striving at once to push back my great chair, and to climb across the wide table to X.

"You beast!" I shrieked. "You spoiler of women! You murderer! I know you now!"

I leaped from the chair seat to the broad arm; but before I could finish my spring to the table, F and O had pulled me down. O was a weakling compared to me, but F was easily my master; and Q, who came on the jump, made my subjugation complete.

I fought and cursed helplessly in their hands, shrieking I know not what wild words at the silent figure opposite me. For X had neither replied to my accusation nor made a move to defend himself against my attempted attack. He leaned easily back in his great chair and only the fixed regard of his veiled eyes betrayed his surprise and interest.

"What the devil's the matter?" demanded A, turning his masked face impatiently from X to me. "Have you gone crazy?"

I looked about me—at the black-hung, sound-proof walls; the black-cowled, unhuman figures—and realized the utter impossibility of accomplishing anything by force against these men of ready violence. But it came to me that I had a very effective weapon in my knowledge of things unknown to the Alphabet.

"Let go of me!" I said shortly; and at a word from A my guards fell away from me, though they held themselves ready. I spoke to A, but I shook an accusing finger across the table at X.

"You think this beggar has given you a hold on Colonel Fairchild! I tell you he's playing with you—lying to you—as he does with every one who stands in his way!"

"You mean these letters are faked?" snarled O.

"No! They're genuine enough. But the beggar has already tried to use them as a club on Colonel Fairchild—and failed!"

The ominous mutter ran around the table.

"You're well informed," sneered X. "But how does that lessen the value of the letters to the Alphabet?"

"If you still believed them valuable you wouldn't bring them here!" I retorted.

X kept his veiled eyes fixed upon me, but said nothing.

"Go on!" said A with dangerous quietness.

I saw that I was involving X deeper and deeper in the web; I saw his end, torn like a wounded wolf by these, his raging brothers; and I hurried on, caring nothing how I betrayed myself so that I accomplished my vengeance.

"The Vice Commission has evidence enough to hang any or all of us, but it can't make the evidence stick because the Commission is an impersonal thing—directed by a committee against an organization that it does not know exists. Now see what the beggar has done! He has done what will turn this general reform movement into a personal fight for the safety of the home—and he has picked out the one man who has the power and training and nerve to make it a winning fight!"

"Give us the facts!" growled A.

"Ask the man who sits for Omega what he has done with Virginia Fairchild!"

The others turned their veiled eyes upon X, who was staring fixedly across the table at me.

"I wonder!" he said softly to himself. "I wonder if I couldn't put a name to *you?*"

"I'll be the goat," muttered O. "*What* did X do with Virginia?"

"Kidnaped her!" I shrieked. "And made Colonel Fairchild knock the bottom out of the market as the price of her honor! When that news gets out, you won't have an impersonal Commission after you—you'll have every man in the city who has a wife, or daughter, or sister to protect."

A rustle of angry assent ran about the table. A sprang to his feet in a storm of rage, and barely withheld himself from leaping at the throat of the impassive X.

"You traitor! You fool! Do you know what they'll do to you—to me—to all the rest of the Alphabet? They'll make this city too —— hot for us, if they don't hang us out of hand!"

"There are other cities and other countries," said X wearily.

"That's all right for you beggars—you make your home in a 'flop;' but what of the man who owns the 'flop,' who's made himself somebody in his own ward?" A broke off shortly.

"But why are you so sure this thing will be traced to the Alphabet?" pursued X.

"I can guarantee that it will," said I.

"I thought so!" was X's soft comment,

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and I knew that he was at last sure of my identity. But I added eagerly—

"He doesn't attempt to deny it, you notice?"

"Why should I?" retorted X. "It's perfectly true, just as my friend from Iota has so kindly explained. I told you Omega was tired of holding the bag for the rest of the Alphabet. We're working on our lone now."

"Make him return the girl unharmed!" I demanded. "It's the only chance for the Alphabet." And a chorus of assent took up the cry.

"I'll see you all in —— first!" said X, rising easily. "What do I care for the Alphabet? I've got just as much right to my private graft as you—or you—or you!" And his index finger stabbed all about me, but never pointed at me.

A HUSH fell upon Alpha. The Letters looked at the masked faces and wished, I think, that they could know what was passing in the minds of their fellows.

"This is treason!" muttered A hoarsely.

"It's bunk!" I sneered. "No Letter can defy Alpha and live. What is the law for the bungler and the unruly?"

"Death!" was the muttered response, and every veiled face was turned toward X.

"There is the bungler, the unruly, the traitor!" I cried, shaking my black-gloved fist at the silent figure across the table. "Are the laws of the Alphabet—are we chosen members of Alpha—mere dead letters? They call us law-breakers; shall we not even observe our own laws?"

"Very well done for a maiden speech," sneered X with a meaning that was lost upon the others.

A turned his inscrutable mask upon the company before he spoke; and though he could not read their faces he evidently found approval in their attitudes.

"Iota has spoken for us," he said coldly. "Alpha demands that Omega return the girl unharmed. If not——"

"All right; I hear," was the insolent response. "If not—what are you going to do about it?"

Before A could answer my taut nerves broke under their long strain, and I shouted:

"Return her! What will you return? What did you do with her body?"

"Her body?" stammered X, shaken from his calm by my fierceness.

I turned to A.

"Virginia Fairchild is dead—murdered—and there sits the murderer. Will the Alphabet sacrifice its existence to save the man who defied it?"

I sank weakly into my chair; but the others were on their feet, crowding closer to X, who stood with his masked face slightly inclined to me as if stunned by my accusation.

Then he threw back his head and burst into a roar of laughter. For a moment I thought him mad, or shamming madness; but his merriment was too spontaneous and lasting for that.

"Dead!" he gasped at length, pulling out a handkerchief and crowding it up under his shroud to dry his eyes. "Dead! And I'll wager he saw her killed!"

"I did—God help me!" I groaned.

"You admit it then?" growled A, and the four stole nearer to X.

He put up his black-gloved hand, palm outward.

"Stop! One fool among us is enough! Virginia Fairchild is alive and well—and as safe as she was in her father's home!"

"Where?" demanded F.

"Where you'll never find her," was the calm response.

"You lie!" I said, leaning forward in my chair. "Virginia's dead; I saw you kill her."

"That's the last thing you'll ever see!" he sneered. "You sneaking rat!"

A's telephone buzzed sharply, and the other Letters waited till he should answer; for it must be a serious matter that was allowed to disturb a member of Alpha during its midnight session.

I sat limp in my great chair, gazing dazedly at X.

A "rat," he had called me. A "rat!" Where else had I learned to connect him with the word and what had it to do with my present business? My numb brain wearily turned the problem over and over, but could find no solution. I realized that I had about reached the end of my strength, both nervous and physical; and what had I really accomplished?

A sharp exclamation from A pierced my dull ears. Something had disturbed the Odd Letter—something so vital that his startled cry had escaped from the shelter of the conical mouthpiece. And I rose to my feet to meet what I had known must come.

"A spy?" rasped the Odd Letter into the

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telephone. "A spy in Alpha? You're crazy! It's impossible! Who are you? Who's this talking? This is A! In the name of Alpha—J? Nonsense! Iota is represented! What——"

A hung up the receiver with nervous care and turned his great black head, quivering with emotion, slowly about the company.

"You heard?" he questioned in a strained voice.

The other black heads nodded quick assent.

"I heard Iota questioned!" I cried fiercely.

A new strength, born of my need, was flooding back through muscle and nerve cell, and I knew that my one chance lay in making a bold stand. I knew, too, with a flash of my new-found wits, what memory had been revived by X's offensive epithet; and the possibility which it suggested thrilled me with a frenzied desire to retrieve the life which I had so gladly thrown away.

"Who questions Iota?" I repeated. "Who dares say that Iota shelters a spy?"

"I do!" retorted X with a ring of vindictive triumph in his voice. "And you are the man!"

XXII

I THINK I laughed. But it was not from mirth, for my heart was sick with anguish at this untimely betrayal, and I clenched my hand upon the telephone instrument to keep from shrieking aloud. The touch of the cold unyielding metal gave me an idea so crazy that I laughed again.

With a quick twisting pull I snapped the extension cord from the instrument and gripped it by the top. Swinging it thus, with the heavy blunt-edged base to give weight and smashing power to my blow, I had a clumsy but efficient weapon.

O gave way before my rush with a yell of terror; I snatched up the forgotten packet of letters as I passed his seat and stuffed them into my pocket. Q, unable to wrench free his own telephone, lunged at me gamely and went down with a broken forearm. But he clutched at me as he fell and threw me partly off my balance.

X pulled his own telephone out by the roots and stood free of his great chair, swinging the instrument by its long cord and calmly awaiting me. F, disdaining the use of anything but his great fists, was rushing around the table the other way to intercept me, roaring his defiance. A had his own telephone to his mouth, and was frantically working the receiver hook in his attempt to get his connection; but it is probable that X and I together had contrived to short-circuit the whole system.

X stepped aside to let F pass him, and I stepped in and met the raging "strong arm" with a smashing blow on the head that dropped him as effectually as a shot would have done. X's lengthened slung-shot whizzed past my head, twisting my headpiece about so that it partially obscured my sight. Instinctively I clutched the cord and jerked it smartly, hoping to pull it out of his hand. Instead I brought him stumbling toward me, for he had wound the wire about his wrist as a precaution against losing his weapon.

I struck at him half blindly as he came, and felt my improvised weapon glance off his head. The blow partly stunned him, and he fell against me, groping wildly for support. I could have finished him then, but such a death would have been too clean for him.

With a shout of exultation I pushed him back into the great chair of Omega, and tore the shroud from his face.

"Here's the spy!" I cried, lifting his dazed face to the light. "Spy and traitor! Blackmailer and murderer! X, the leader of the beggars, is also the leader of society, and the most active vice-president of the Vice Commission! Allow me, gentlemen, to present Mr. Harrison Kemble!"

The remaining members of Alpha looked and gasped—Q, leaning weakly against the hexagonal table, with his broken arm hanging useless at his side; O, peering fearfully from the protecting shadow of his great chair, too frightened even to run; A, halfway to the curtained entrance, checking his intention to alarm the guards. Only F, sprawling where he had fallen under my blow, evinced no interest.

I slipped between the curtains into the narrow hall that encircled the secret chamber, still clutching my awkward bludgeon, and started upon my desperate attempt to reach the upper world of law and life.

A few quick steps brought me to the beginning of the winding passage where the black deaf mute kept guard. He was standing by the telegraph instrument with his

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fingers on the key and his face turned up the passage.

But before I could strike something warned him. Perhaps he felt the vibrations of my footsteps through his feet, as deaf mutes feel the rhythm of music. He turned sharply with a hissing intake of his breath and held up one hand to stop me, while with the other he pressed the key.

I did not wait for him to signal—probably a tap or two would sound a general alarm and trap me there. I leaped at him fiercely, smashing down his guard with my heavy instrument, beating him frantically upon the head and shoulders. I did not think to kill him, though I would have done so gladly if I could; but I did hope to stun him.

A lucky blow in the face blinded the beast. I deliberately planted the next blow behind his ear and had the satisfaction of hearing him give a peculiar little grunt and see him fall, inert and hardly breathing, beneath the annunciator that he guarded.

Leaning over his great bulk, I breathlessly studied this telltale system that set an invisible barrier between me and the outer world. I knew nothing of telegraphy; but if I had been an expert it would have availed me nothing, for I had no idea what message to send.

I remembered that at each station I had been checked in as Number Six, presumably because I had been the sixth man to enter. It appeared probable, then, that the first man to leave would be checked out as Number One. It was a tremendous chance to take, but I could think of nothing better.

With a sense of suffocation I plugged in on Number One and pressed the button. So quickly that it seemed incredible, a light flashed in the annunciator and Number One dropped into view. I started up the inclined passage on the run, still carrying my telephone in case of pursuit.

Around and around I went, till I grew dizzy with the constant circling. I had no idea how many turns I must make, nor how many curtain barriers I must pass; I had taken no count of such things during my descent because I had never expected to return. I paused at each set of curtains and peered between them before I advanced; and finally I hid my telephone instrument in the heavy folds of one of these barriers.

My thoughts, too, were going around and around, turning over what I had learned in Alpha. I was still dazed by my discovery that the beggar X, the mysterious murderer of Rosalie, and Kemble, the society leader, were the same person—my three best-hated enemies in one. That X and the murderer were one I had suspected; that Kemble might be identified with the mysterious A and the criminal Red Alphabet had occurred to me, but had been dismissed as too improbable; and it is only natural that I should not have suspected Virginia's affianced husband of being her murderer.

As for Kemble's assertion that Virginia was not dead, I knew not what to think. I had seen her killed, and there could not be two Virginias. But he had given me a ray of hope.

SEVERAL more turns brought me face to face with Four and Five, waiting with bare blades. I clasped my hands before me, but did not stop.

"Urgent business!" I cried, hoping to bluff my way past.

The bright blades quivered toward me threateningly, and "Stop!" commanded the one whom I surmised to be Four.

"Let me pass!" I stormed. "I go on Alpha's business."

"The telegraph started to speak," was the stubborn answer.

"Very likely I startled Six," I suggested. "The old fool is getting to seeing things."

"I'll ask him," said Four.

"You got the passing signal?" I persisted.

He nodded curt assent, and repeated—

"I'll ask him."

I waited in a cold sweat of suspense, clasping my hands together till my broken nails cut through my black gloves, while Four called again and again on the telegraph but got no response.

"He's probably looking the other way!" I raged, "and you'll keep me standing here all night till he happens to turn around. Let me pass, I say!"

"Stand back!" was the stern warning as I started forward.

I laughed at them recklessly and pressed on.

"You fools! Who could come out of Alpha but one who went in? Are you the slaves of Alpha or the masters? Stand aside, I say!"

Their blades quivered before my breast; I heard their quick, nervous breathing, and

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saw their left hands clutching and unclutching in indecision; but they did not strike.

"You got the passing signal," I said coldly. "You know me for a member of Alpha —your master. Now stop me if you dare!" And with my hands clasped uselessly before me I advanced upon them.

Audacity won. I felt the grip of their staying hands, the prick of their keen knives; then they fell away from me, muttering angrily in some Italian dialect, and I was past the guard.

If I had shown any sign of fear or hesitation, I had been a dead man; but I wheeled about with a sharp command:

"Signal Three, and keep that knife to cut your spaghetti. If you've made me late there'll be new guards on this station next week."

Sullenly, but without further protest or delay, Four gave and received the necessary signal; and I passed on. Three gave me no trouble whatsoever.

"Take your pick, boss," he chuckled, waving his hand toward the collection of weapons left with him. "It's first come first served at this shop."

I pocketed my arms, rejoicing at the cold grip of my automatics, and passed on. If I had to fight now I should not have to rely on bare hands or improvised weapons; and I did not see how I could get past the outer guard without a fight.

I pushed back the curtains and stepped into the locker-room. Although it was empty, I knew that my coming had been signaled, for I had seen the negro make the necessary connections. But I did not know where Station Two was—it was not in this room, for there was neither annunciator or telephone.

Another set of black curtains hung across the other end of the room, but before I ventured to pass them I waited and listened. It seemed to me that I heard the murmur of voices, excited and angry, coming from without and drawing nearer. Had I been discovered? Was I to be caught when freedom lay so near?

I took the metal check from my pocket, thinking to recover my outer clothes; then it occurred to me that if I had to face a betrayed Alphabet I was much better off in my present disguise. So, keeping my right hand on my revolver, I pushed through the black curtains.

Before me were two halls, both empty. The one leading straight ahead was wide and held some furniture; evidently it was the hall of the house proper. The one angling away at my left was narrow and bare, and I judged it to be the tortuous one through which I had been conducted on my entrance. Down this narrow passage, drawing ever nearer, came the sound of excited but subdued voices.

I rushed down the broad hall to the front door and wrenched desperately at its fastenings. They were complicated and of strange design, and I could do nothing with them. The two doors opening off either side of the hall were locked and bolted. I was trapped.

Around the corner of the narrow passage came a curious procession. Two men were carrying a limp and battered body. Behind them, as closely as the narrow passage would permit, were three or four other men, talking excitedly in subdued tones.

The two bearers were dressed in the same black semi-uniform that marked them as guards; but, instead of being shrouded as were the inner guards, they wore simple black curtain masks and the usual long black gloves. The man whom they carried, and two of the men following them, were in evening dress.

I guessed that J had at last succeeded in entering Alpha House, though after what tribulations I could easily imagine from his limp form and bloodied face; and I knew that I confronted perhaps the greatest danger of that night of dangers.

Assuming an air of authority, I advanced to meet the little procession.

"Take him in there," I commanded, motioning toward the locker-room. "Get in under cover—all of you."

Startled exclamations came from several of the party; and the leading guard demanded—

"Who are you?"

"From Alpha!" I answered shortly, hoping that the magic word would allay his evident suspicion; and I stepped aside to let them pass.

After a moment's hesitation they went on as I had directed, and as soon as the way was free I darted down the passage toward the alley door. I heard a shout behind me and a rising confusion of angry voices; but I drove ahead, pistol in hand, praying that I might have been right in my guess and that I should find the outer door unguarded.

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And so it proved. Indeed, the inner door stood open, and the entryway was brightly lighted. As I threw off the fastenings of the alley door one of the masked guards leaped around the corner of the passage, calling upon me to stop and enforcing his command by a wild shot in my direction.

I shot back as wildly, spraying the bullets from my automatic across the passage, and got him before he could wound me. Others were crowding behind him, but my fusillade made them hesitate.

The last bolt finally gave way. I swung open the door as a shot from the wounded but determined guard creased my shoulder, and slammed the door shut on a volley that smashed and splintered through the heavy wood, but by some good fortune left me unscathed.

I emptied my other revolver through the door to warn them not to press me too closely, and then fled down the darkest part of the alley, stripping myself of shroud and gloves as I went. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw the alley door flung open and a broad beam of yellow light cut across the alley. Then the light snapped out.

For a moment I was free, breathing the cool night air, looking out through eyes that were dimmed by no black veil, feeling my feet strike smartly upon the sounding pavement of the empty street. By some miracle of chance, I had come out of the lions' den alive.

MEANWHILE, as I learned later, things were going badly with Kemble down in the subterranean chamber of Alpha House.

When he was finally able to realize that his head was something more than a painful appendage he found himself looking into three black faces that somehow seemed not so much masked as darkened with hate and anger.

"Did he get away?" asked Kemble weakly.

"Never mind him!" snarled O. "We'll make sure of you first!"

"You fools!" groaned Kemble. "Are you going to let him get away with all the secrets of Alpha?"

"He can't pass the guards," said A.

"He got in past them, didn't he?"

"Yes, and so did you!" jeered O. "But you won't get out, my ladies' pet!"

"Where's the girl?" interrupted Q, his voice hoarse with the pain he was so stoically enduring.

"Where you'll never find her!" was the retort, given with a revival of Kemble's former insolence.

"Perhaps not," agreed A coolly. "But what good will that do you? Come, Kemble, be sensible, and we may be able to make a deal yet."

"I don't deal with crooks like you!" sneered Kemble.

"I'm speaking for the Alphabet," was the stern reminder. "If Miss Fairchild is really alive and unharmed and we can restore her to her father, we can make a bargain with him that will save the Alphabet."

"I promised to restore her today," said Kemble.

"That's partly what you took her away for, I imagine," remarked A shrewdly. "Tell us where to find her, and we'll give you twenty-four hours to get out of the city."

"You're generous!" sneered Kemble.

"We have to be," was the brutal answer.

"And how long would I last after you got the facts out of me? Not long enough to say 'Now I lay me!'"

"Take your choice!" snapped A. "What shall we do—give you to Six for a plaything, or give you a chance to run?"

"Suppose I run to the police and blow the whole game?"

"You haven't got the nerve, Kemble. You've got to have people look up to you and think you're a little better than they are. And you can't show up the Alphabet without getting yourself in bad."

"I'll see you damned first!" snapped Kemble.

"Take it or leave it."

"The Colonel would pay a million for his daughter's return——"

"It isn't cash we'll be asking of the Colonel."

"It's cash I want."

"How much?"

"What's it worth to you?" bargained Kemble coolly.

"To me and the Alphabet—a hundred thousand dollars."

"Done!"

"I'll give you ten thousand in twenty-four hours, and the rest as fast as I can get it to you. We don't either of us want to use checks."

"Good enough—if you keep your word."

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"I'm speaking for Alpha, remember." And the other two black heads nodded their ratification of the bargain. "Now where's the girl?"

"I'll take you to her."

"And give you a chance to slip away?" sneered O.

"Do you think I'm fool enough to tell you down here, with that dumb ape outside ready to croak me if you three crook your fingers? I won't tell you a word until I'm out of Alpha House."

"Fasten his hands with the telephone wire," suggested Q, and A and O proceeded to do so.

"There's no time to lose," said Kemble sharply. "You don't want to let Smith get ahead of you."

"Who's Smith?" asked A, with sudden suspicion.

"The man you set to watch Fairchild," was the impatient answer. "Good Lord, man, do you mean to say you don't know that he was here in J's place?"

"Impossible!" cried A, but his voice shook.

"I tell you I know! And I have a hunch he guessed where the girl is—he's been there before."

"And we've been wasting time here!" groaned Q. "Why didn't you say so in the beginning?"

Kemble grinned evilly.

"I hadn't made my bargain then, and I thought he might avenge me if Alpha wouldn't listen to reason."

"Who's the first man out?" asked A.

"Not me!" said O with a shiver. "He may be laying for the rest of us outside."

"I'll go," said Q. "I want to get this arm patched up."

He disappeared through the black curtains, only to reappear immediately and beckon them outside.

"Six is down," he snarled, "and the signal's throwing fits!"

XXIII

THE house on Queer Street stood dark and silent under the morning stars.

"Better let me go in with you, sir," urged the chauffeur, who had been saying the same thing ever since we started.

Forbes was the Colonel's master of garage—a man who had driven winning cars in international cup contests. Routed out of his bed after midnight by a crazy man without hat or coat, he had grasped the situation with a celerity that argued well for his ability to cope with the unexpected; and even with the little information that I dared give him he had been eager to do my bidding on the strength of my unsupported word that it meant life or death to Miss Virginia.

In five minutes from the time that he had come blinking sleepily to the door Forbes had dressed himself, provided me with motor gear and got the Colonel's fastest car out of the garage. It is needless to say that we did not stop to ask the Colonel's permission. And how we had "burned the road" through the sleeping city!

It was not, therefore, with any doubt of Forbes's faithfulness that I declined his company.

"I'm sorry, old man, but you'll be much more valuable to me outside. Run down and stop in front of the next house, facing this way. Keep your motor running, and your eye peeled for trouble. Don't stop if you have to pick me up—just slow down a little; for, believe me, if I come running there will be some tough specimens close behind me."

"All right, sir," agreed Forbes reluctantly. "You can trust me for that. But—supposing you don't come out?"

"Give me an hour. If I'm not out then, 'phone the Colonel and put it up to him. There won't be anything to do *here*."

"I'll be too far away to help you," he said regretfully. "But it's just as you say, sir."

"Thanks, Forbes," I said, shaking his hand. "I sha'n't worry about my getaway with you on the job."

He started silently down the street while I softly mounted the front porch of the house of the rats. Using Dodge's methods, I soon had the door open and stepped into the little entryway. For some time I stood there in the dark, revolver in hand, listening to the mystifying noises that always haunt a house at night. But I could hear nothing alarming.

I slipped off my shoes, turned on my electric-lamp and stole through the silent house. Room after room I searched quickly but thoroughly, throwing my pencil of light into every corner and hiding-place, but the house was as empty and as clean as at my last

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visit. This, however, was just what I had expected. I had no idea that I should find Virginia immured in one of the rooms. I had not forgotten the trap-door in the closet.

Assured that I was alone, I returned to the big front room on the second floor and opened the closet door. I knew that the trap in the floor must be operated by a concealed spring; but a hasty testing of the few likely looking spots failed to discover it.

I had borrowed from Forbes a short, heavy, cold chisel, which I meant to use as a lever in prying up the trap; but to my astonishment I could not find even the edge of the trap. For a moment I was nonplussed; then I guessed that its edges had been cunningly contrived to follow the edges and ends of the flooring pieces, so that the existence of a trap might not be betrayed by a regular parallelogram outlined on the floor.

Driving my chisel into the likeliest-looking crack, I pulled the handle toward me—carefully, but with increasing force. The boarding creaked and splintered somewhat, but would not yield; and I could not get purchase enough to force it. After several unsuccessful attempts I backed up so that I was sitting outside the closet, where I could brace my feet against the door-casings. This time I drove the chisel between the ends of two boards, took a good grip on the chisel handle and suddenly straightened out my knees.

The result must have been extremely funny, had there been anyone there to see. I turned a complete back somersault, and landed on my nose with a force that made my head swim. The trap flew up with a soft click, and through the irregular opening came the white flash of incandescents and the squeal of frightened rats.

I sat up groggily to view my work. For a moment my dazed wits insisted that some one must have entered the house through the secret passage, and that I might expect to see three masked faces rising out of the hole. Then, as nothing happened, I began to reason that I might easily have struck the hidden spring and so opened the trap by its own mechanism.

Lying flat on my stomach, with my revolver well in advance, I crawled quietly forward, and peered cautiously over the edge of the opening. But there was nothing in the place that threatened me.

I edged forward carefully and searched the sides of the place for some means of descent. It was not hard to find. From the edge over which I leaned, where it was least likely to be seen from above, hung a stout ladder with rope sides and padded wooden rungs. I took a precautionary look about the room and then went down the ladder—cautiously, for I had come to expect tricks everywhere in this house.

I found the first one in the dead man. I had to pass him in descending; and I discovered that he really hung about on a level with the ground floor, though cunningly arranged mirrors made him appear to be much lower down.

But the surprising thing was that it was not a man at all. It was, in fact, only a dummy stuffed with straw and provided with a ghastly mask. The raw flesh at his throat was a piece of cow's liver, held in place by fine-meshed wire-netting so that it could not be carried away in too large pieces. Seen close at hand, the thing was a huge joke; but when a man already harried was given a brief view of its reflection from above it was likely to prove quite as revolting as if it were in truth the thing it simulated.

The rats were real enough, however—though not so many as I had thought. They squealed and scurried about me, filling my nostrils with their musky odor; but I cared nothing for them now.

The swaying ladder took me below the platform that formed a false flooring beneath the dummy and landed me at the real bottom of the well-hole. It was a small square place, brightly lighted, but bare and clean except for the rats. On three sides the walls were blank; on the fourth was a massive iron door, held in three places by great bars set across it.

AT SIGHT of this barred door the mad hope that had brought me to Queer Street took on an appearance of reason. If this were the door to the underground passage suspected by Dodge it surely would not be barred on the inside. But if it were the door to a prison, it was easy to explain both its fastenings and the small trap-door that pierced its center. I pulled the bars from their sockets with hands that could not work fast enough, took the door by one of the bar sockets, and pulled it toward me.

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I looked into a windowless cell about ten feet square, brightly lighted by incandescents set behind bull's-eyes of heavy glass. While unmistakably a place of confinement, it was comfortably furnished, though there was a noticeable absence of anything that could be used as a weapon. There were books and magazines on the little table, and the remnants of a plain but evidently palatable meal.

In the center of the cell, with her hands clenched tightly over her heart, and her pale face showing alternate fear and hope, stood Virginia Fairchild.

"You!" she groaned despairingly, and shrank away from me.

"Thank God you're safe!" I cried, and leaped over the high threshold with outstretched arms. With one quick movement, she put the little table between us.

"Don't you dare touch me, sir!"

"Just as you like!" I answered shortly, angry at her reception after all that I had endured to find her. "But tell me! Have they been cruel to you?"

"The woman has been as kind as she dared, I suppose," was the listless answer; "and I've had enough to eat. But those dreadful rats——"

She stared shiveringly past me, and I realized for the first time that the high threshold was in fact a sheet of burnished steel, curving outward, so that the rats could not rush the room when the door was open.

"They can't get in here?" I questioned quickly.

"They haven't yet, but they're always trying."

She shivered again, and drew her dressing-gown closer about her. The movement fixed my attention on a fact which I had noted with passing surprise; over some fluffy undergarments she was wearing a lounging-robe that was the twin brother of mine, and her big slippers would certainly have fitted my feet more closely than they did hers.

"Did they take away your clothes?" I asked, suddenly guessing at this further precaution to prevent her escape.

"You know they did!" she snapped. "Why do you ask silly questions? Why did you come, anyway?"

"I came to take you away," I answered dully.

"I'm quite comfortable here, thank you," she said through stiff lips, and I realized that the girl was in mortal terror of me.

"For God's sake, Virginia! What is the matter? Don't you trust me?"

"Trust you! Why shouldn't I trust you?" she laughed hysterically.

She opened a book on the table and showed me my name on its fly-leaf, written in my own hand; she pulled out of one pocket of the dressing-gown a handkerchief bearing my name in indelible ink, and out of the other one of my pet pipes.

"Of course I trust you," she raged, "knowing that you brought me here, and for what purpose!"

"Good Lord!" I gasped, as the full cunning of Kemble's plot burst upon me.

"I trusted you once too often!" wailed Virginia, beginning to lose control of herself. "I might have known you had some motive in asking to escort me that night."

It was useless for me to try to explain; and I knew that we were tempting Fate by remaining longer in this place. I pulled off my motor-coat and handed it to her.

"Add this to my contribution. We've got to get out of here."

"Have a little mercy, Mr. Smith. Take me home. Oh, *please* take me home!"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, though I don't suppose you'll believe it."

"Then you were just holding me for ransom?" she asked with quick hope.

"Put on this coat," I commanded roughly. "And button it up tight. I've got to carry you."

She shrank and paled at that, though she obeyed me silently. But when I advanced to take her in my arms she thrust me back, and darted past me to the high threshold. There she stopped, shivering with a fear that was divided between the man and the rats.

"Come, Miss Fairchild, we've no time for silly nonsense. If you won't come quietly I'll leave you here with the door open. I think the rats could jump that shield if they tried often enough."

It was a brutal thing to say, but I preferred threats to force; and I must get her out before the Alphabet came. She gave a little choking cry that went to my heart, and hid her face in her shaking hands.

I lifted her tenderly and laid one of her arms about my shoulder. She shrank and shivered at my touch, but did not attempt to stop me.

"You must hold on to me," I said quietly,

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"for I've got to climb. And keep your eyes shut—there are worse things than rats to see."

She obeyed without a word, and I stepped carefully over the threshold and bore her to the foot of the ladder.

I had thought that I could never forgive her persistent misinterpretation of my motive in rescuing her, yet now that I held her in my arms for the first time, I knew that I still loved her—that I must always love her, whatever she should say or do. The pressure of her soft body against my own, the unwilling clasp of her arm about my neck, the subtle perfume of her, thrilled me with an ecstasy so intoxicating that I staggered under her light weight.

Then she stirred uneasily and her arm loosened its hold on my shoulder. The motion, slight as it was, brought the sobering remembrance of her hate and distrust of me.

"Hold tight," I said harshly. "I'm going to climb now."

It was no easy task to carry her up that swaying ladder. She could easily have climbed herself, had the circumstances been different; but I dared not trust her nerves with that dummy of death to pass. Virginia stirred again, and I hastened to reassure her.

"We're half way. A few minutes more and we'll be safe."

On the heels of my confident words, faint but unmistakable, came the slam of a door, and the sound of low excited voices. The Alphabet was in the house.

Virginia opened her eyes, and struggled to free herself from my arms.

"Father!" she cried, and struggled harder.

"Keep quiet!" I whispered angrily, meaning to explain.

Then my eyes followed her horrified gaze, and I saw that she had sighted the figure swinging head downward at my very shoulder.

She opened her mouth to shriek her terror; and unable to use either hand, I stopped her mouth with my own. She fought so furiously that I thought I should lose my precarious foothold, then went limp in my arms; and I saw with relief that she had fainted. I scrambled hurriedly up the ladder and laid my burden just outside the closet door.

One precious moment I wasted to listen to the sounds made by the approaching Alphabet; then back down the ladder I went at a speed that burned my hands. With my nippers and my teeth I chewed through the rope that held the dummy and carried that back to lay it beside Virginia. Finally I closed the trap-door upon our retreat, and moved the living and the dead out of immediate range of the door into the hall.

The members of the Alphabet were climbing the stairs now, both front and back, as I had judged they would. I could see their electric-torches flicker along the hall, striking lower as they cautiously advanced, and hear the murmur of their double assault. I lifted Virginia, still unconscious, to my left shoulder, took the dummy by the rope that bound its arms, and crept toward the door.

With a rush and a half-smothered shout the two parties took the top steps and mingled in the hall. I leaped through the open door, swung the dummy into their midst and took the front stairs at a blind jump. Behind me rose a medley of oaths and cries; then came the rush of hurrying feet and spattering shots, while the electric fingers began to feel me out.

I STUMBLED through the open front door and descended the steps at one stride, only to be confronted by a new danger. Before the house stood a great touring-car. The man at the wheel opened fire on me, and I felt at least one of his bullets sear my side.

Shielding Virginia as much as I could with my own body, I ran headlong through the fusillade toward my own car. Forbes had heard the shooting and was coming to meet me as fast as he could drive, honking his horn to encourage me.

As I stumbled over a hummock of grass Virginia stirred and groaned. I stopped, panting and almost spent, to set her upon her feet. She opened her eyes and shivered as she saw me. In the cheerless light of the gray dawn I must have been anything but a welcome sight.

"Get into the car!" I gasped. "Forbes will take care of you. I'll stand them off."

"Forbes?" she asked stupidly.

"Run, for God's sake!" I cried, and pushed her toward the slowing car.

Figures, unrecognizable even at that short distance, were swarming out of the house; and the chauffeur had left off shooting to settle himself at the wheel of his humming motor, ready for a flying start.

I sent one shot in the direction of the dim

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figures and saw them duck for cover; the rest of my magazine I emptied into the front of the other car.

"Get in! Get in!" Forbes was shrieking behind me.

"Wait till I empty this other gun," I pleaded.

"Get in, you fool! You've smashed something for them. They'll be shooting us up in a minute!"

I staggered to the car and tumbled half through the open door of the tonneau. Forbes started the car with a leap, and I must have been thrown out had not Virginia caught me and helped me pull myself inside.

"Down on the floor!" I cried, forcing her to her knees and piling the seat cushions in front of her.

To my surprise, however, not another shot was fired at us; and presently Forbes slowed down and turned to look at us.

"You all right, Miss Fairchild?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes—oh, yes! Is it really you, Forbes? Where are you taking me?"

"Home," he answered, in a surprised tone. "Did they get you, Smith?"

"No," I lied, mechanically helping Virginia replace the cushions and crawling up beside her. "But I'm about all in."

"You're a holy terror," said Forbes, and laughed to hide a deeper emotion. Then he bent over his wheel.

Houses and fields reeled drunkenly by, looking ghostly and unreal in the hazy dawn. The girl at my side leaned wearily in her corner, as far away from me as she could get, and stared ahead with a white set face.

I was back again in the car with the dead Virginia, and the unwilling chauffeur was hurrying us to the morgue. There was something I meant to do, something I ought to do, but I could not remember what. For blocks the thing worried me; then all at once it came to me.

I ought to kiss Virginia good-by. I could not do it before when I first found her dead, but I could now. I had wanted to when I held her in my arms, that time I carried her through the trap, so long ago. She would not let me then; now that she was dead she would not care—and it meant so much to me.

I leaned toward her unsteadily and spoke her name. She answered angrily and put her hand on my breast to keep me off. She snatched her hand away with a stifled shriek; and held it up to the growing light. It was red with blood.

"You're hurt!" she gasped with something like pity in her voice.

I laughed weakly. Funny thing, that a girl who was dead should think I was hurt. I tried to reason with her, to explain that it was she who had been stabbed; but she did not appear to hear me.

I bent again to kiss her, realized that I was falling—falling; and, I suppose, fainted outright.

XXIV

I HAD tried to stop three bullets, they told me when I recovered consciousness in the Colonel's house; but my wonderful luck had held and none of the wounds was more than a deep scratch. I had lost blood enough to be somewhat shaky on my legs; but the surgeon was willing to guarantee that I was still able to do the work of an ordinary man.

I was at least too lively to be comfortable in bed. I wanted to see Virginia and the Colonel; and I wanted particularly to see Dodge, both for the news that he would bring and because my disguise had suffered during the last two days.

The Colonel came to me as soon as he was informed that I had asked for him. His face was yellow, his eyes were dull, and his shoulders drooped wearily. He was but the shadow of the sprightly, energetic old warrior whom I had first met.

He inquired solicitously regarding my hurts and my general condition; but I noted that he did not offer his hand, and that he was cold and almost resentful in his bearing.

"And how is Miss Fairchild?" I asked.

"Pretty badly upset, but nothing worse. I—I don't believe I've thanked you, Smith——"

"Don't!" I laughed. "I promised to bring her back, you know. We can save Petroleum Central yet, Colonel."

"Yes," he answered apathetically. "I have already arranged for that."

"I shall be ready for another fight by the time the market opens."

"I—I don't think it will be necessary to trouble you."

"What do you mean, Colonel? Have I lost my secretaryship?"

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The old man looked at me with something like the old fighting fire in his tired eyes.

"I have accepted your resignation, sir."

"But I haven't resigned."

"I am giving you that chance instead of disgracing you publicly."

"But why?"

The Colonel made a gesture of weary impatience.

"I leave out of consideration Virginia's explanation of why she was kidnaped—the fact that you brought her back safe cancels that. But I do not know of anything that will atone for these."

And the Colonel exhibited, out of my reach, the packet of letters that I had brought from Alpha House.

"You think those letters were written to me?" I asked dazedly.

"Mrs. Fairchild has admitted as much."

"But my name is not Hal!" I protested. "And I never saw Mrs. Fairchild until I came here."

"Sir! Do you question my wife's word?"

"Very well, sir," I answered coolly, though I was hot enough within. "If that is your belief I resign, of course."

"Thank you. That will simplify matters. I am going to let you go scot free, Smith—you have me hipped. Any attempt to punish you will only publish my wife's dishonor—and she is still my wife!"

The poor old Colonel! How that admission must have cut his tender pride! Bitter as I was against Mrs. Fairchild, I admired the honest old soldier for his loyalty to her.

"Just one question, sir. Do you intend to make public *any* of the strange happenings of the last few days?"

He gave me a look of scorn, but answered straightly:

"I do not. You are perfectly safe from me, sir." I smiled.

"I suppose it is too much to ask you to believe, but I am glad for your sake that you take that attitude. Some day you will be glad, too."

He swung on his heel, too angry to reply, and stalked to the door. There he hesitated, fumbling with the knob; and when he turned, his voice was broken.

"Smith, you don't know how sorely you have hurt me. You were a man after my own heart; I would have trusted you in any crisis with anything I had. And then to find you were, indeed, only a snake in the grass!"

"I'm sorry, Colonel——"

"Sorry! You——"

The Colonel slammed the door upon a shriveling burst of profanity.

After that I no longer cared to see Virginia.

DODGE came at last, as deferential and self effacing as ever; but the closing door that left us together wrought a wonderful change in him.

He sprang to the door and locked it, made sure that we were otherwise safe from intrusion and spying, and then came over to grasp my hand.

"You're a holy terror!" he chuckled, unconsciously employing Forbes' phrase. "What you did to the Alphabet was a shame!"

"I was lucky!" I protested. "And I had a good coach."

"Are you fit for another ruction?"

"Depends on what's in it for me."

"Kemble gave the Alphabet the slip. I thought you might like to get him."

"Would I!" I cried, springing to my feet. "It seems to be still a case of Kemble or me. But hold on! What did you do with Rosalie's body?"

"Sit down, and I'll fix your make-up while I tell you."

Rosalie's body was to be embalmed and held for disposition. Dodge had soon discovered that the victim was not Virginia, and had wasted a deal of time trying to reach me and tell me what I had guessed after finding Virginia alive and unharmed. Dodge had been too busy to keep his appointment with J, but apparently J had waited for him long enough to let me pass the guards in his place.

From Dodge I also learned what had happened in Alpha after my escape. It seemed that A, who took personal command of the expedition to Queer Street, would not trust Kemble to enter the house with the rescuing party for fear of some trick; and that Kemble, undoubtedly to gain time, had told them nothing of the peculiarities of the place.

Kemble had been left under the guard of two men in a second car about half a mile from the house. One of these guards, who was from Kemble's own gang, had knocked his companion over the head with a blackjack, thrown him into the roadside weeds and driven off with Kemble. As none of

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A's party had recognized me, they naturally decided that it was the escaped Kemble who had thwarted them.

Further, the majority of Alpha was of the opinion that Kemble had lied in naming me as the spy, believing that the intruder had been a detective on the trail of Virginia. This was good news to me, for I knew the Alphabet too well not to fear its vengeance.

"Just now," concluded Dodge, "the Alphabet is scouring the city for Kemble. They know Virginia is home, and that you are here; but I honestly think you have little to fear from them. They believe that Kemble is hidden in his own house; and they are planning to attack it in force tonight and settle him."

"They're crazy!" I cried incredulously. "Has A lost control of them?"

"It's his plan. He's lost control of himself. When Kemble threatened to put a name to A he signed his own death warrant. Kemble knows that well enough, and he's used his position in the Vice Commission to have his house heavily guarded tonight. Now here's what I suggest: You have that guard composed of husky, honest, fighting policemen who won't ask questions. We'll nab Kemble if he's there, and wait and bag the Alphabet anyhow."

"But——"

"I know it isn't strictly according to law, but your Commission has been making its own laws."

"But I've resigned!"

"What of that? Bluff it through! The kind of men we want won't be too particular about your authority so long as you guarantee them a fight."

It was quite as simple as Dodge had anticipated. By dark we had twenty picked men in Kemble's house, and the frightened servants under guard. Kemble was not in the house. He had come home some time in the early morning, the butler informed us; but he had gone out again in less than half an hour. Our search showed that he had spent his brief visit in destroying his private papers.

Kemble's town house was a fine old-fashioned place which had been built by his father. It was set a little back from the sidewalk, and had a fair-sized grass plot between it and the stables in the rear; but it was separated from its neighbors by only a narrow strip of turf. Thus it was exposed to attack on all sides, and even from the roof. It was rendered further vulnerable by the fact that it had a basement.

It was our plan, however, to invite entrance to the house while preventing escape from it—to make it a trap, in other words. Accordingly, we illuminated the library and the servants' third-floor quarters to give the impression that Kemble was working and that the rest of the household was retiring. We stationed most of our men in the basement and on the first floor, so that they could close the trap when it had been sprung, and posted a few sentries on the upper floors. Dodge and I, and the sergeant in charge of the detail, shoeless and provided with electric torches, patrolled the building together.

The time dragged wearily for several hours after nightfall. But as our patrol of three stole into the dark kitchen a little before midnight one of the guards called to us softly. He had seen a man stealing along in the shadow of the stables, apparently trying to work nearer to the house. We joined him, and peered out.

It was a better night for us than for those we expected. There was a half moon which the light clouds, driven by a brisk wind, only partially obscured. Some shelter was offered by ornamental shrubs set irregularly about the grounds; but between these havens were wide stretches of lawn which must be traversed while the moon was clouded over.

The man we watched was well aware of these conditions. He advanced so slowly that at times we thought he had evaded us, but each time he reappeared a little nearer to his goal. Then he made a miscalculation of the speed of the cloud on which he was depending and took his last flying steps under the full glare of the moon.

"The crippled beggar!" I whispered excitedly, and raised my revolver.

"Don't shoot!" hissed Dodge, knocking my weapon aside. "That's Kemble!"

The warning came too late. The guard had followed my action and had fired. The man stopped in his stride, then lunged forward into the shrub for which he was heading.

"Now you've done it!" snapped Dodge.

"My fault," I acknowledged, glad that it had not been my finger that had pulled the trigger.

"Sit tight!" growled the sergeant to his

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subordinate. "Pass the word. We don't want any more snap-shots."

"Won't it alarm the neighborhood?" I asked.

"Naw! They'll think it's an auto blowing out a muffler."

"Why didn't you tell me Kemble used that disguise?" I whispered reproachfully to Dodge.

"I forgot! Just learned it myself today."

"All right," growled the sergeant. "Hustle him in, boys, and look sharp about it."

Two officers slipped silently into the grounds and quickly returned with a still figure between them.

"Is he dead?" I whispered.

"No, sir, but he's hit bad. Where'll we put him?"

"Upstairs," advised Dodge.

SO UPSTAIRS went the four of us with the silent figure in our midst, leaving the sergeant in command. Dodge went ahead of the bearers and I followed them, playing our flashlights on the treads that they might not stumble. Thus was the last of the Kembles borne through the dark by the upholders of the law that he had defied, into the very chamber where he had first seen the light.

There was no question of its being Kemble. Dodge proved that as soon as we had sent the officers back to their posts and lighted a single shaded lamp above the bed. With deft touches he removed the disfiguring disguise while I hurriedly bared the man's chest. A round red hole showed where the bullet had entered, and it had not come out. I straightened up and passed my hand over my damp forehead.

"Bad?" asked Dodge.

"Through the lungs. He's bleeding internally."

"Any chance?"

"Not so far as my knowledge goes. We ought to have a surgeon, Dodge."

"He'd only live to hang for the murder of Rosalie."

"But I can't take the responsibility——"

"Think of those his disgrace would involve——"

"Get me some brandy, then."

The liquor revived Kemble, and he sat up. The exertion made him cough, and he looked curiously at the frothy blood that I wiped from his lips. I gave him another drink, and he grinned at me sarcastically.

"Got me, did you?"

"I didn't fire the shot—though I'm afraid I'm responsible for it."

"Afraid?" he sneered. "It's bad, then?" I nodded silently.

"I'll call a doctor, if you like. But—I'm afraid it won't do any good."

"I'll take your word for it—you've got a foolish streak of honesty in you. How long do you give me?"

"Less than an hour."

He made a wry face, but showed no fear.

"Short shrift, old man. But I always thought a lingering death was a good deal of a bore."

"Is there any one you'd like to see? Any message?"

"Meaning Virginia?" he asked, with a grin that was not unfriendly.

"Any one," I answered somewhat stiffly. "We've been enemies, Kemble, and a man usually likes to have friends about him at a time like this."

He motioned for the brandy and I gave him another drink, then set the decanter where he could help himself.

"Friends!" he scoffed. "How many friends shall I have when they hear? Lord, what a buzzing there will be in the social beehive! I wonder how many of the women I've made love to will brag of it behind their fans? Bah! There isn't one of them with half the wit of Rosalie."

"Then why did you kill her?" I blurted out.

A shadow crossed his face; then he laughed harshly.

"She was jealous—the little fool. She found a black glove in my room—one I brought away from Alpha; and when I laughed at her she pulled a knife on me. I didn't mean to kill her, but she was getting in my way. You know who she was?"

"Yes."

"You were amusingly slow to get on. You've given me a lot of fun, Smith—and quite a bit of worry, too."

"You had me guessing when you played Limpy Joe," I answered, to humor him.

"And at other times!" he chuckled. "Smith, how did you ever get Virginia away from Queer Street?"

"I'll give you tale for tale," I answered, laughing carelessly to hide my real eagerness.

"Done!" he agreed. "You won't mind

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talking first? I might be called away before you finished."

And so I told my tale.

I SHALL not try to give Kemble's own words. He grew rapidly weaker and his speech became broken. But through it all he gloried openly in his craft and wickedness; and I liked him far better as a crook than I had as a blackguardly gentleman.

He had had two purposes in following me as the crippled beggar: to spy upon me, and to bedevil me. He had realized from the first that I was likely to be in his way, and later he had done me the honor to be jealous of me on Virginia's account. When he found that he could neither bribe nor frighten me he would have had me killed out of hand, he coolly informed me, but for the fact that he had always believed that some day he might get something on me and be able to use me himself. When I found him in Harley's pool-room he had deliberately sent me to Alpha House in hopes that I would be killed by the guards as an intruder and quietly disposed of. He had never believed that I was really a member of the Alphabet.

The house in Queer Street was his own idea. He had often entertained ladies there, and he had hidden Virginia there as the place least likely to be suspected. Dreadful things had occurred in that lonely house —among the least of them the torture of rich fools who had been lured there by Rosalie or some other fair bait. That was the reason the house was so bare; he always had it redecorated and newly furnished for each new occasion so that the interior could not be identified. And there was a secret passage, as Dodge had surmised.

Just how Kemble really felt toward Virginia I could not determine. He spoke of her always with respect, but never with tenderness; nor did he betray regret for any sorrow that he had caused her. I thought that he might have loved her truly, had he dared; but that he had feared to allow himself to care too much lest he should some day betray his real self to her. But he was very frank in his statement that he had meant to marry her, both for her money and her social position.

He had kidnaped her, as I had guessed, in order to blackmail the colonel into knocking the bottom out of Petroleum Central; for he had continued to gamble in the stock, and had gone short on it to such an extent that only some such desperate measure could keep him from a sensational ruin. He had also planned, by rescuing Virginia, to convince both her and the Colonel of his real regard for her; for he frankly admitted that neither of them had been entirely satisfied that his devotion was sincere.

He had tried to throw the blame of the kidnaping upon me chiefly out of devilment; he assured me blandly that I had written myself in Virginia's black books by persisting in lecturing her—women liked to be caressed, not corrected.

Kemble choked over the cynicism and when he coughed he brought up blood. His breathing was growing quicker, and his breast shook with his effort to get air into his lungs. The brandy helped him but little now. I saw that the end was very near, and so signed to Dodge.

"I think—that's—about all," gasped the dying man between labored respirations. "Don't look so sad—Mr. Secretary—Smith. You're a crook, too, remember—and your name isn't—Smith."

"How do you know?" I asked, startled.

"Rosalie—told me—how she found you."

"You knew who I was from the first, thn?"

He shook his head in negation.

"But you saw me follow Rosalie into Transom Court that day."

"I — was watching — her — jealous. Wouldn't tell me—what—A wanted—of her."

He coughed again, and I did what little I could to ease him.

"Bend—down," he whispered, when he could speak; and I put my ear to his lips, thinking perhaps he had some last word for Virginia. His right arm leaped up with surprising vigor and a sharp blade flashed at my throat.

"Look out!" cried Dodge as he struck it aside.

"Thanks," I said. "But he hasn't the strength to do any harm."

"A prick of the skin would have done it," retorted Dodge, and I understood that he suspected the needle-like blade to be poisoned.

"Too bad!" whispered Kemble, and met my reproachful gaze with a ghastly grin.

Then he lifted his head, listening, and I realized that the telephone-bell in the

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library below had been ringing intermittently for several minutes.

"Why don't the fools unhook the receiver?" muttered Dodge.

Kemble scowled irritably.

"Tell her—I—can't come—tonight," he whispered.

His head dropped back clumsily, and he lay still. I put my hand on his heart.

"He's gone," I whispered.

"Listen!" hissed Dodge.

From below came a confused murmur, a sharp command, and a shot.

XXV

THE ALPHABET had entered the house by jimmying several doors and windows at once. They had no suspicion of the surprise awaiting them, and they were thrown into utter confusion when one of them found the ray of his pocket-lamp reflected from the gleaming shield of a policeman.

The shot that followed brought the remainder of the gang into the house with a rush. The police withheld their fire till the last man was in, then turned on the lights and called upon their prisoners to surrender. Many of the gang threw down their weapons at the first summons; but half a dozen of the most desperate made a dash for the stairs, firing as they ran. Dodge and I, rushing out of the death chamber, reached the head of the stairs just as these men began their ascent.

"Trapped!" shrieked Dodge, and began shooting.

A man dropped, and another faltered, but the rest came on. Some of those who had surrendered recovered their weapons before they could be secured and joined in the rush for freedom.

"For God's sake, Dodge!" I cried, trying to deflect his deadly aim.

He drove his elbow into my tender ribs with a snarling oath, and I reeled dizzily against the wall while he marched slowly down the stairs with a blazing gun in either hand. His weapons belched and rattled like Gatlings in action, spraying lead on all before him; he was enveloped in the thin haze produced by the explosion of smokeless powder; the shells flung from the ejectors of his weapons clattered steadily against the wainscoted staircase.

The crowd on the stairs broke and tumbled over each other in their eagerness to get out of his way. He pursued them through the shambles he had made, rearming himself with weapons they dropped. And so, raining destruction upon prisoners and fugitives alike, he went through the house, a walking death. The sergeant tried to arrest him, and got the butt of the gun instead of the bullet; and before the other officers could rally, Dodge was out of the house and away.

His work was done. There was no fight left in the Alphabet, living or dead. The sergeant, still groggy from Dodge's blow but doggedly dutiful, set composedly to tally up the score, while I gave the wounded what aid I could until the regular physicians should arrive.

There were more than a score of the Alphabet in our hands, at least half of whom were dead or seriously hurt. They were a motley crew—some in evening dress, some in rags; but all were masked in some fashion. I accompanied the sergeant as he made the rounds, pulling half mask or handkerchief from sullen faces, and marveled at some of the revelations. I would have given much to have Dodge at my elbow to make me acquainted with these worthies.

"Look who's here," said the sergeant with something like compassion, as he untied a mask from the face of one of Dodge's groaning targets.

"Mullane!" I exclaimed with a sense of shock, as I looked into the pain-twisted face of the Captain of detectives who had tried to fix upon me the murder of P. The sergeant nodded sorrowfully.

"I always thought he was spending more than he made, but I didn't know he was an out and out crook. Where are you hit, Captain?" he asked not unkindly.

"The groin!" groaned the sufferer. "I saw the mob breaking in and followed them, and one of your men plugged me."

"Put out your pipe," growled the sergeant. "That ain't a service gun in your pocket, and we ain't wearing veils to protect our complexions."

"I'll break you for this!" snarled Mullane, but the sergeant passed on with a shrug.

At the foot of the stairs lay the bodies of three men. As the leaders of the half-dozen that made the break for the upper floor they had been the special targets of Dodge's battery practise. They were so unmistakably beyond help that I had hardly

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paused beside them on my first round as volunteer surgeon; now we straightened them out, and uncovered their faces.

"Hello!" exclaimed the sergeant. "Here's a game one—came here with one arm already in splints!"

Sure enough, the right forearm was broken and tightly bandaged. My thoughts flew instinctively to the secret chamber in Alpha House and the manner in which I had put the plucky Q out of the fight with a broken arm. Was this Q, game to the last?

"Know him?" I asked.

"Can't place him; but I have a hunch we've got him mugged."

He uncovered the next dead face and vented his surprise in a great oath.

"For the love of God, it's Jake Kroner!" he whispered, as if afraid to publish the truth. "There's many a man higher up would sleep the sweeter tonight if he knew this."

"How in the world did he come here?" I questioned, though a light was beginning to break upon me.

"He was leading the bunch—I had him spotted from the first; but I never guessed who he really was."

Could it really be A himself? I wondered, and to settle the question I made a hurried search of his pockets. I found a note-book containing daily information regarding Petroleum Central — information which seemed to tally exactly with my daily reports to A, paralleled with records of his market operations. These things might have been mere coincidences; but it could not be chance that had kept the dead man out of the market for ten days after the Colonel had discovered Kemble's treachery. There could be no mistake about it, I thought—this must be the mysterious A.

And the third man? Had the cowardly O, chief of the blackmailers, found the courage to accompany the other High Letters on this fatal raid? It seemed probable. The body was that of an undersized, mean-looking man, who at least to my fancy would have spoken and acted just as O had done. His pockets held nothing that would help me to identify him, and the sergeant did not know him; but I was convinced that of the six members of Alpha only J was left. And from what Dodge had told me I questioned if J would ever be dangerous again.

IF ALPHA were wiped out, then was the Alphabet itself in a parlous state. The weakness of the organization lay in the fact that while in theory a democracy, it was in practise an oligarchy. Its politics were feudal rather than republican.

Men elected to the Alphabet by their gangs became little lords. Members of Alpha were princes. And A, if he had the personal power, could rule as absolutely as any of the Lord's anointed. The power lay in Alpha, not in the gangs that represented the people; and with Alpha annihilated the Alphabet would fall into anarchy. What this meant to me personally needs no elaboration.

Filled with new hope, I drew the sergeant aside and asked—

"What are you going to do about Dodge?"

"We were both under your orders, sir," he answered, saluting stiffly.

"Not at all," I hastened to assure him. "Dodge went crazy and ran amuck, and that must have been a nasty crack he gave you. I'm not going to stand for such doings."

The sergeant rubbed his sore head, and eyed me thoughtfully.

"Maybe he had some good reason for going off the handle like that."

"He had."

"Well—he didn't shoot up any of the boys, and he might 'a' plugged me instead of slugging me. I guess I'll just forget it. They're only a bunch of crooks, anyhow, and they had it coming."

"I'm glad you can look at it in that way," I said with considerable relief. "Now about Kemble. It'll be very easy to make it appear that he was fighting with us; and there are a lot of good people in this town who are going to feel it pretty hard if we show him up for a crook. If I do the necessary lying, will you and your men back me up?"

"We will that, sir. We'd 'a' been glad to hang him, but we don't fight dead men."

"Thanks!" I said; for his promise meant much to Virginia and the Colonel. "Sergeant, I'm not making any promises, but I think you'll lose your chevrons for this night's work. The Mayor has been looking for an honest man who knows when to fight and when to forgive. I prophesy that you'll be made Chief before the week's out."

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The sergeant saluted dazedly, and I left him stammering and blushing like a youth caught in his first love affair.

As I went into the library for my hat and coat, an officer stopped me.

"Beg pardon, sir; but here's a message come for Mr. Kemble." And he handed me a note addressed in a woman's hand.

"Where's the messenger?" I snapped.

"We're holding him. He's just an A.D.T. boy, sir."

"I'll look into it," I said, and tore open the envelope.

Within was a tab pulled from a desk calendar pad. The date of the day just gone was ringed about with red, and on the margin was written:

You have failed me again. I will wait until midnight; then——

There was no signature, but I recognized Mrs. Fairchild's peculiar script and realized that Kemble, dying, had concealed his greatest villainy.

"Where did you get this?" I demanded of the uneasy messenger boy.

"A lady at the Soubrette. Any answer?"

"I'll go myself." I paid him liberally, and dismissed him with the warning: "This is a police matter, my boy. I guess you know enough to keep your mouth shut?"

"I been running night messages two years," he assured me.

WHEN I entered the Soubrette it was nearly one o'clock, and the place was filled with the noisy, drunken, outcast crowd to which it offered unlicensed pleasures.

I was recognized almost instantly, and met sour looks a-plenty; but I was not interfered with. Heedless of all but my errand, I went straight to the corner booth in which I had seen Virginia on my previous visit to the place, divided the closed curtains, and stepped quietly inside.

My heart sank as I saw the lonely, quiet figure leaning across the little table with its face hidden in its crossed arms. Though it was nearly an hour past midnight, I had prayed that hope might restrain desperation until I could reach her. Had I indeed come too late?

A stifled sob was my answer, and I had to choke down my own emotion before I could speak.

"Mrs. Fairchild!"

The woman started up with a sound that was almost a cry of terror. Her face was colorless and wet with tears; her eyes were filmed with the agony of her soul; she had bitten her lip till the blood had trickled down upon her chin. In spite of all that I knew of her—in spite of all she had done to me—I pitied her in her abandonment of grief and shame.

"You?" she muttered, shrinking away and gazing with terror at the still swaying curtains. "Where is Harry?"

"He told me to tell you he couldn't come tonight," I answered, with full belief that I was delivering Kemble's message to the one for whom he had meant it.

"I don't believe you! You never were friends——"

Silently I extended her curious note to Kemble.

"Why couldn't he come?" she demanded angrily. "What are you keeping from me? Has anything happened?"

I saw that her suspicions must be partly allayed before she would trust me.

"Kemble has been hurt."

"You mean you've killed him!" she hissed. I shook my head.

"At least you've come to gloat over me!"

"I've come to take you home, Mrs. Fairchild."

"Home?" she laughed, and the bitterness of death was in that hushed false mirth. "Home? I have no home—no husband—no hope! I am a lost woman, Mr. Smith—dead and damned!"

"What have you done?"

"You'll soon know!"

Almost before I could realize that her words were meant to distract my attention from her actions she had whipped her hand from her bosom and raised it to her mouth. I caught her hand just in time, and wrenched from her a tiny vial of deadly poison. Once swallowed it would have run through her veins like fire, and no earthly means could have saved her.

She flamed into rage, demanding that I let her die and hide her shame in the grave. From that she passed to pleading and promises; then came the tears for which I had been waiting. She bowed her head on the table and wept miserably, while all about us roared the songs and laughter of those further along the way on which she had started.

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As her sobs lessened I began to speak. I told her what I intended should be the public version of Kemble's death, and observed with satisfaction that she exhibited more relief than sorrow that he was gone. I assured her that his name would never be connected with hers; offered to assume the authorship of the letters that had been found on me, and make it appear that I had driven her almost out of her senses by blackmail; and finally I renewed my urgings that she let me take her home.

"It's too late," she answered apathetically. "You'd be kinder to let me die."

"Your husband still loves you," I persisted. "He showed it very plainly to me today. And I know he is man enough to forget and forgive."

"It's too late," she repeated. "I left a note telling him what I was doing—and why."

"You told him you were going away with——"

"With the man I love."

"Good Lord!" I groaned. Then I suggested eagerly: "But it may not be too late! Where did you leave it?"

"On the library table."

"If I could get Briggs on the wire——"

"Let me try!" she cried, grasping eagerly at the frail chance. "The Colonel has put the ban on you."

I pushed the button in the wall and directed a scowling waiter to fetch the portable telephone with which the place was equipped. I tried to put speed into his feet with a generous tip, but it seemed to me that money must have lost its power. I don't think Mrs. Fairchild realized how long he was gone; she was planning excitedly how she would get back the compromising note, and slip back gradually into the life she had thought to leave forever. Outwardly I humored her, for it was good to keep her mind on cheerful things; inwardly I fretted and sweated over the time we were losing.

The waiter returned at last with the telephone—and Colonel Fairchild.

His wife sat and stared, speechless with terror and shame. I tried to effect a nonchalance which I was far from feeling. But the Colonel was splendid; and the waiter, who had scented scandal, retired reluctantly, disappointed but satisfied.

"I just got your note, Eugenia," the Colonel said in the most ordinary tone. "The car is waiting below. I'll be glad to have you come, too, Smith."

I nodded my agreement.

"Will you give Mrs. Fairchild your arm, sir? And, madam, it would be better if you lowered your veil."

Both suggestions were necessary, for the poor woman was quite dazed and helpless. Indeed, her husband had to adjust her veil for her and help her to her feet, and I feared for a moment that we should have to carry her out.

"Courage, madam," I whispered. "It's only a few steps. It will look less suspicious if I walk behind," I added to the Colonel. "You'll trust me not to run?"

He nodded curtly, and I held the curtains aside for them to pass out.

We carried it off, too, though I don't know which of us most dreaded the ordeal. Mrs. Fairchild braced as soon as she was conscious of the curious eyes directed at us, and made her exit with quiet dignity. The Colonel bent over her with just the proper air of protection; and I permitted myself to stare curiously about the noisy, smoky room. It would have taken a keener eye than any in that hilarious assemblage to detect our fraud.

Forbes was waiting for us at the car door —there was no footman along. And as the Colonel and I helped Mrs. Fairchild in I saw that Virginia had accompanied her father.

She would not look at me, but gave all her attention to making her mother comfortable; and I realized that once again appearances were against me.

"I'll get up with Forbes," I suggested, as the Colonel motioned me to precede him into the automobile.

He agreed with a nod, and I shut the door upon the reunited family.

"How did the Colonel happen to come to the Soubrette?" I asked eagerly, as Forbes started the car on its homeward run.

Forbes gave me an ugly side-glance and exclaimed:

"He paid Lucette more than you did. It's a fine bunch of grafters the Colonel has on his pay-roll!"

"You think Mrs. Fairchild went to meet *me*?"

"You were caught with the goods, weren't you?" he sneered. "You're the nerviest fellow I ever knew, Mr. Smith—and about the crookedest."

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WITH resigned indifference I followed the Colonel and the women into the library. The Colonel locked the two doors and made sure that all the windows were fast and curtained against spies before he took his seat behind the great desk. His first words amazed and startled me.

"Smith, I want the facts about the fight at Kemble's house."

"How did you learn of it?" I gasped.

"Sergeant Mills got me out of bed to tell me. That was how I came to find your note so soon," he added, turning to his wife.

"Then you know about—Kemble?" I asked hesitatingly; and Virginia's quick sob apprised me that she, too, had heard of her lover's death.

"Yes—Mills says he was shot during the gang's attack."

"He died like a man," I answered promptly.

"Kemble ordered the police to his house?"

"Yes. But I commanded the detail, and enforced secrecy."

"What authority had you? You resigned this morning."

"You had not notified the police of that, sir. Don't blame them."

"You're under arrest!" snapped the Colonel.

"Very well, sir." I unfastened my special officer's badge and laid it, together with my two revolvers, on the desk before him.

"Smith, I gave you a chance this morning. I agreed to forget your attempts to break up my home, hoping to save something from the wreck. You have made that impossible. You have left me no shred of personal honor; you have brought my business honor under suspicion; but, by——! You shall not ruin me politically! I shall disavow this whole night's proceedings, and have you indicted for conspiracy and murder."

"Then you don't know who composed the gang that we wiped out?"

"I believe they were your friends and confederates, whom you used the police to get out of your way."

"If you take that stand, sir, you will finish what the gang attempted and ruin yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Every blow that you attribute to me—personal and business and political—was the work of some member of that gang."

"But you wrote these letters to my wife!" The Colonel smashed the incriminating packet on the desk.

"I have not denied it."

"And you kidnaped my daughter!"

"That's a lie!" said a cool voice behind me.

I jumped with the rest, and stared as dazedly; but my emotions were those of joy rather than of anger or fear.

Between the portières that hid the door into the reception-room, smiling, cool, self-possessed, with a glad light in his face that I had never seen before, stood my servant-master Dodge.

XXVI

HOW did you get in?" thundered the Colonel.

"Walked in, Colonel," answered Dodge smilingly. "To a man of my profession doors and windows open at a word — Don't do that!" he added sharply, as the Colonel's hand went out for the telephone. "And leave those guns alone! I've come as a friend."

"A friend of your fellow crook, Smith?" sneered the Colonel.

"Of both of you—all of you. Will you declare a half-hour truce, Colonel?"

"I suppose I'll have to," agreed the Colonel grudgingly.

"Dodge, what are you going to do?" I demanded anxiously.

"Tell some unpleasant truths that you are too brave to tell."

"You're not!" I shouted springing to my feet.

"Sit down," he commanded quietly. "You've been the goat long enough."

"Don't listen to him, Colonel!" I begged.

"I shall be glad to listen!" retorted the Colonel, misunderstanding my agitation.

I sank back helplessly.

"Then for Heaven's sake, get the women out."

"It would be better, Colonel," Dodge approved.

"We'll wait in the reception room," said Virginia rising readily; but Dodge stopped her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fairchild, but that won't do. If you'll just go over to the other side of the room——"

"You're afraid I'll telephone!" flared Virginia.

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"Exactly. And you'd be very sorry if you did."

"Do what he asks," growled the Colonel.

Virginia started for the far corner of the room; but Mrs. Fairchild came forward to the desk. She was deathly pale and shuddering with repressed sobs, but collected.

"If Dodge will allow me a few minutes first, I can save him some explanations."

"Eugenia!"

"Don't do it, Mrs. Fairchild!" I cried. "This doesn't affect you. Don't listen to her, Colonel."

The Colonel smashed his fist upon the desk.

"—— your interference, sir! I'll listen to whom I please!"

I arose to accompany Dodge into chancery, but Mrs. Fairchild stopped me.

"Let Dodge go alone, Mr. Smith. Come, Virginia. I want you three to hear what I have to say. Victor," she began, "you have read those letters?"

"Yes!"

"And you, Mr. Smith?"

"No—but I heard parts of them read."

"What?" roared the Colonel.

"Those letters were written to Harry Kemble—Hal, I used to call him."

"Mother!" gasped Virginia.

"But you said—" stammered the Colonel.

"I lied! I've been lying to you for years—but—I've done nothing worse until tonight. I married you for your wealth and position, Victor—not for love. I thought I loved Kemble, but I know now that it was just a silly flirtation."

"But these letters——"

"There isn't a word in them that's really bad. But I didn't speak very respectfully of you, and—they were written *after* our marriage. I was just a silly young girl—I've always been that, I think. I thought it was smart to have an affair, and to keep a man like Kemble running after me. That's all it ever was to me—just a silly bit of excitement. And I soon grew tired of it and dropped it—especially when I saw how Virginia felt toward him."

"The match was of your making, not mine!" cried Virginia.

"And why not? I knew nothing bad of him at first. Then one day he told me he still had my letters and would put them in my husband's hands if I did not persuade him to manipulate the market. Mr. Smith will probably recall the day—he overheard us and interfered."

I nodded, and Mrs. Fairchild hurried on.

"I did try, you'll remember, Victor—I was frantic and didn't know what else to do. And when he found that you wouldn't be bullied, he blackmailed me——"

"Why didn't you tell me?" stormed the Colonel. "I'd have killed the scoundrel!"

"That's why. You'd only have made matters worse."

"And yet you continued to praise him to me," said Virginia reproachfully.

"I had to! He made me! He was dreadfully jealous of Mr. Smith—he was continually playing the market the wrong way—and he kept me frightened half out of my wits. It was his suggestion that I say I wrote those letters to Mr. Smith. I—I think that was the last straw, Victor—that you should believe that I would have an affair with your secretary."

I know I laughed at that, but the others seemed to see no humor in it.

"Was that what made you plan to elope with Smith?"

"With Smith? I told you I was going with Kemble."

"You don't mention the man's name!" retorted the Colonel, producing the note in evidence. "You say merely that you're going with the man you love."

"I meant Kemble—but it was a lie!" she said brokenly. "He was desperate and so was I. He was discovered and ruined, he said, and must get out of the country. He threatened to expose me after all I'd done to buy him off, if I didn't go with him—he said you wouldn't let us starve. I didn't care for myself—I meant to get him out of the country, and then—I was trying to save for you a shred of your honor. I—I had learned to love you, Victor; and I was so ashamed——"

"Love!" muttered the Colonel. "If all this is true, how did Smith happen to find you?"

I started to explain, but she controlled herself to answer—

"When Kemble didn't meet me as he had promised, I telephoned and telephoned, but I couldn't get any answer——"

"It's a likely story!" growled the Colonel uneasily.

"It's true!" blazed his wife. "Mr. Smith has been very generous—he has tried to help me—to protect my honor and yours.

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You may doubt me but you *shall* believe in his honesty."

"Smith has sins of his own to answer for."

Mrs. Fairchild turned and gave me her hand.

"I've done much to injure you in the past, Mr. Smith; I hope I have atoned a little. I want to thank you for all you've tried to do for me; but I'm sure it would have been better——"

"Hush!" I interrupted, for it was not best that she should betray her attempt at suicide. "I thank you for your bravery. I believe it will help us to set things right."

Mrs. Fairchild pressed my hand, then turned to the Colonel.

"That is all, I think. Shall we retire now?"

"Not until father says he believes and forgives you!" cried Virginia, putting a tender arm about the faltering woman.

"Forgive her for loving Kemble?" sneered the Colonel.

"I hate him!" was the passionate cry. "I hated him living, and I hate him dead. I've hated him ever since I knew what he really was. Oh, Victor——"

The Colonel rose slowly and took the trembling hands she offered him.

"Eugenia, you said you had learned to love me——"

"I do! Oh, believe me, I do!"

"Yet you would have gone with Kemble——"

"I thought it would be easier for you. I didn't think you cared for me."

"Not care!" groaned the Colonel, taking her in his arms. "Oh, my dear, my dear! It was because I cared so much that I was harsh with you. I think, Eugenia, we must both forgive and forget." He gave her tenderly into Virginia's care and called to Dodge, "Let's get this over with."

"Dodge," I interposed, "let the ladies go to their rooms. I'm sure they'll promise not to interfere."

Dodge gave the Colonel a keen look then turned to the women.

"I shall be glad to take their word for that."

Both promised readily, but Virginia lingered, eyeing me with patent distrust.

"We're leaving you alone with them," she objected to her father.

"Virginia!" cried Mrs. Fairchild. "Do you still doubt Mr. Smith?"

"I have good reason to," was the chilling answer.

"I shall be perfectly safe," the Colonel assured her.

"Perfectly safe," echoed Dodge. "We have no score to settle with your father, Miss Fairchild."

THEY left us at that; and Dodge rapidly but vividly explained the character and organization of the Alphabet, and related the death of A and the other high Letters. He glossed over my part in these affairs except where he could praise my bravery and resource; and I saw that he meant to exonerate me from any share in the kidnaping, and leave me free to tell the Colonel whatever I thought best of my actual connection with the Alphabet.

"This is all most astounding—and most valuable information for the Vice Commission," said the Colonel at length. "But how does it better Smith's position? I know he's a member of the gang——"

"He's not and never was," retorted Dodge. "Just how he became involved in it all I'm going to let him tell. But there are some things he's too modest to tell. I don't believe in speaking ill of the dead, Colonel, but you must know the truth about Kemble."

"You don't mean *he* was a member of the Alphabet?"

Dodge laughed dryly, then reviewed the whole story of the kidnaping, passed lightly over my adventures in Alpha House, and related the bald truth about Kemble's death.

"I knew Harry wasn't square with me, but I can't believe that," groaned the Colonel.

"You don't need to!" retorted Dodge. "Your own police will verify anything I'm telling you; or you can question their prisoners. You will understand why we started the lie about Kemble's manner of dying."

"Why didn't you tell me?" the Colonel asked me.

"I thought your daughter loved Kemble—I tried to protect his memory for her sake and yours."

"What a fool I've been!" groaned the Colonel.

"You believe me, then?" asked Dodge.

"I must. As you say, I can easily prove the truth of it all; but—I don't think I shall try."

"That's your wisest course," answered Dodge, standing up. "Can I do anything more before I go?"

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"You're not going!" I cried. "I've got about ten million questions to ask you."

"Suppose I leave you two together?" suggested the Colonel.

"I'll go with Dodge—" I began.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" stormed the Colonel.

"I forgot I was under arrest."

The Colonel pushed my badge and guns toward me with an oath that had behind it nothing but kindly feeling.

"I'll fight it out with you later," he said. "I'm too tired now."

"You'll want my resignation again when you do," I laughed; but he shook hands with both before he left us.

"Now, for heaven's sake, Dodge, open up!" I cried. "Who the devil are you, anyhow?"

"K, the man who helped hold you up in your own rooms."

"What?"

"You're mighty slow about some things, Smith. I've betrayed myself to you a dozen times."

"And you're really a member of the Alphabet! A thief, from your letter. What's your specialty?"

"Picking pockets and all kinds of light-fingered work." He spread out his slim, supple fingers for my inspection. "I'm one of the best in the profesh, if I do say it."

"But what's your real business?"

"Valeting," he answered with a grin.

"Nonsense!"

"It's the truth."

"But what were you originally?" I persisted.

Dodge's face darkened.

"A gentleman—like yourself. But the Alphabet made a tool of me without my suspecting anything till it was too late. Then I found myself ruined—my home broken up—a long prison term staring me in the face. You'd recall the story if I told you my name—but I'm not going to.

"I disappeared. I'm supposed to be dead. I wanted to die; but more than death I wanted revenge. The difficulty was, I hadn't the least idea who was responsible for my downfall—that's the beauty of the Alphabet's system.

"Then one day I fell in with one of my old acquaintances. He didn't know me from Adam, but I recognized him and made myself agreeable. He took a liking to me—taught me a lot of crooked tricks, and gradually gave me an inkling of the big organization with which he was connected. For years I was a tool—a handy man; that's all I am now, to most of the Alphabet. But I kept worming my way in, picking up a bit here and there, making myself a proficient crook, till finally my friend—disappeared; and I made my letter through election to take his place."

"You mean you killed him?"

"Just that. I wanted personal vengeance, Smith. I've been a thorn in the side of the Alphabet for years—picking them off one by one, as I had the chance, but always waiting for the big clean-up that I made last night."

"I believe you're a devil!" I said with a shudder.

"Perhaps!" he retorted with an impatient shrug. "You weren't much different when you went into Alpha House that night."

"Why didn't you go yourself?" I asked, for I had never been satisfied with his explanation.

"I told you—because it didn't suit my plans. There was no way of smuggling a weapon into that subterranean chamber, and I can't understand yet how you did what you did and got out alive. I never expected you to come back."

"You told me that—but you didn't tell me why you let me go!"

Dodge grinned wickedly.

"I was going to use your death as an excuse to get the Colonel to raid the place the next time Alpha met. It seemed the surest way of getting the whole gang at once."

"You're the most cold-blooded man I ever saw," I observed with a shiver. "And I've been thinking you were my friend."

"I think I've proved my friendship more than once—but my vengeance comes first."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Almost. There are one or two who escaped last night——"

He shook off his air of morbid brooding and smiled at me amiably.

"Fire away now. What do you want to know?"

"What about the letter to P?"

"That was a funny mix-up. It was Kemble who ordered you robbed—I think to get you in bad with Miss Fairchild, by making it appear that you had taken the money yourself. But at that time I didn't suspect that Kemble had any hand in it—I didn't

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even suspect that he was one of the Alphabet. Z came to me and said X wanted that letter."

"I thought the members of the Alphabet didn't know each other," I objected.

"SOME of us do, of course. We can't always go masked when we're on a job. Well, Z didn't like the job—he wasn't a stick-up man, you know, just an ordinary beggar. Without betraying your real business at Fairchild's, I told him that you were crook enough to want to see the inside of that letter before you delivered it, and persuaded him that you would probably come straight home and sweat it open, and we'd best hold you up right there in your own apartments. It's easy to make a crook believe a thing like that—he thinks every man is as crooked as he is.

"But I had no intention of letting you be robbed. You were getting in well with the Fairchilds and giving us lots of valuable information. I was playing A's game for my own purposes, remember. So I put G on you, disguised to look something like Z himself. G didn't rob you—just slipped the letter into another pocket. I palmed it when I searched you, and let you see me put it back."

"Then it was Z I saw dealt the Death Hand and killed?"

"Yes. A turned his thumb down because Z had butted in on the job of another gang, and that's against the rules. Really, though, it was more to spite X. X let the decree go because he was sore at Z, and wasn't altogether sure whether he had merely bungled or had really robbed you and held out.

"Z was condemned by Alpha without knowing that he had been on trial. That's a pleasant way the Alphabet has—it's helped me to get more than one man put out of the way by the Alphabet itself."

"Do you know who killed P?"

"I did."

"Gad! You're a regular butcher."

"That was where I made a big mistake, and nearly queered everything. P came to me on business—had a light-fingered job he wanted done. He stood in your little entry hall, fingering his token and squabbling over the size of my bit. Unluckily for him, he told me that nobody knew he'd come to see me. It was too good a chance to miss. I took my gun-butt to him, and—well—you saw him.

"Then I fell into a panic—it always gets me after a clean-up. It was the same way at Kemble's. I propped the body against your door, so that suspicion would fall on the first one who came along—it's a trick as old as the Arabian Nights. I didn't stop to search him, or I'd have saved us both some worry. He'd dropped the token when I hit him. I slipped it into your old coat, thinking maybe I'd give it to you later. Then I got out the back way and laid low till I'd got my nerve back."

"But you had a perfect alibi."

"My dear man, faking alibis is one of the easiest things the Alphabet does. I had one all ready for you if you'd needed it. Isn't that about all that's important? It's getting pretty light."

"There are a lot of other things I'd like to know about——"

"Little things; you can figure them out for yourself. Just keep in mind that A was playing a lone hand, and I've been dealing the cards to suit myself. Your information reached A through me, and I reported only what I wanted him to know.

"Poor old Jake! He was a wonder at low politics; but when it came to anything big or subtle he blundered at every step. He thought running the Alphabet would be like bossing a tough ward; but his smile and his fighting face and his personality were a large part of his stock in trade. When he donned the shroud he certainly was a dead one.

"From all I've heard I'm inclined to think Kroner was scared half to death every time he sat with Alpha. A man like him is usually superstitious. If Kemble had been able to get a little ready money together he'd soon been Odd Letter himself."

"But A made a big success of his stock speculations."

"Thanks to your information, and my advice."

"Did he really expect me to run away with Miss Fairchild?"

"He certainly did—your refusal almost broke his heart."

"What was his object?"

"Both to spite Kemble and to ruin him. Kroner was an imitator of the society leader, you know, and Kemble used to throw the hooks into him once in a while through the newspapers just for the fun of seeing him squirm. Kroner thought it would be the quintessence of joy to have the elegant

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Kemble cut out on the girl and her money by a man in the pay of the despised ward boss."

"Tell me one thing more. What have we to fear from the Alphabet?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing. The Alphabet as an organization is non-existent. One or two of the Letters would like to meet me, but I expect to see them first. They don't know you—Kemble gets the blame for several things that you put over. If the Colonel wants to put the finishing touches on the Alphabet you can make it appear like a Commission affair and clean up the whole gang without exposing yourself."

"By gad!" I cried. "We ought to get into Alpha House before they destroy the evidence there."

"They've already done so," grinned Dodge. "The place was blown up soon after the raid on Kemble's."

"Did you have a hand in that?"

"No. I imagine J ordered it, when he heard the news— Well, old man, this is good-by."

"I'm going to see you again?"

"I doubt it very much."

"I'm almost sorry you aren't really a valet, so I could induce you to stay."

"Thanks. Smith—do you mind telling me your real name and identity?"

I told him, and he pulled a chagrined face.

"Lord! And I never guessed it! If *you* need me to clean up the Alphabet—if you ever need me—advertise in the metropolitan papers, telling K where to find J. If I'm alive I'll get into communication with you. But I'm sure you won't need me. The Red Alphabet is only a jumble of scattered and broken letters."

XXVII

"MISS FAIRCHILD would like to see you as soon as possible, sir," announced Briggs about noon of the following day.

"Very well, Briggs. Do you suppose I could borrow the Colonel's valet for half an hour?" Briggs almost grinned.

"I have an idea, sir, you'd find it difficult to think of anything in this house that you couldn't have."

To the promptly appearing valet I gave instructions that made him open his eyes. But he fell to with a relish and soon had me clean shaven, my hair parted more becomingly, and my face and hands washed clean of the disguise that had become more familiar to me than my own natural coloring.

"If monsieur will permit the suggestion—he is far more handsome this way than before," said the delighted Frenchman, standing back and viewing me with his head on one side.

"Thanks! I hope it will impress others the same way."

The dazed Briggs conducted me to Virginia's own private sitting-room; and the doubt with which he announced "Mr. Smith" was reflected in Virginia's face as she met me.

"I—I should hardly recognize you," she stammered.

"I am going to consider that as a compliment," I laughed. "You wished to see me, Miss Fairchild?"

"I—I want to ask your pardon! I feel that I ought to go on my knees to you——"

"Nonsense! We all make mistakes. I have wronged you terribly in my thoughts."

"You had good reason," she murmured.

"The Colonel has told you?"

"Yes—everything, I think."

"Not everything, Miss Fairchild. There are some things I believed you did not wish him to know."

The slight flush in her cheeks faded, and left her pale and weary-looking. There were dark lines under her eyes; her lids were swollen with crying, and her lips trembled pitifully. She looked to be hardly fit to receive a further shock, but I felt that I had no right to keep her in ignorance.

"You had a sister—a twin—whom you had thought dead for years." She nodded assent, and I saw something like relief come into her face. "Suddenly this sister reappeared. She had become—a woman of the world, shall we say? She was jealous of your position, your wealth and comfort. She wanted money and pleasures—but not your kind.

"She threatened to shame you before your friends by parading herself with notorious companions in places where you would not care to be seen. And she could have done it, because your own mother could hardly tell you apart."

"Go on!" whispered Virginia.

"You were afraid to tell your father——"

"I'm afraid now!"

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"I think that is where you made a mistake. But no matter. You paid your sister to keep quiet, but she couldn't. You kept paying her, and she kept making you trouble——"

"I tried to get her to give up her terrible life!" sobbed Virginia. "But she had to have the excitement. I'm as badly off as poor mother. I've lived in agony for months, and what have I gained by it?"

I took her hands firmly and spoke with calmness, almost with cheer.

"You need suffer no longer, Miss Fairchild. Your sister has—gone away."

"Dead?" she whispered.

"I have not told your father. We can bury her quietly, if you like."

"Did—did Harry Kemble kill her?"

"I'd rather not go into that——"

"I know he did! She was dreadfully jealous of him. She threatened me—— Mr. Smith, do we need to tell my father?"

"Not at all. Nobody knows who Rosalie really is—nobody need even know that she has been killed. She will just disappear. We'll lay her in some quiet spot that you can visit occasionally——"

"Oh, it's dreadful!" sobbed Virginia. "I ought to be heartbroken, but I'm glad—glad! She wouldn't give it up—she'd have gone on and on——"

"Believe me, it is better as it is. If you will let me know when you have decided I will see that everything is done as you wish it. I shall be in town for several days yet——"

"You're going away?"

"I think I'd better. My work here is done——"

"Sit down—please! We have other matters to discuss."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait?"

She shook her head impatiently.

"I want to settle everything now—and then forget it. You remember the first time you thought you saw me—on the Avenue?"

"I shall never forget it."

"But you know now it wasn't I," she said quickly. "It was poor Rosalie. I didn't know at the time that she was alive—much less in the city. And—I thought you were trying to be impertinent."

"I'm not sure that I wasn't," I said, with a grin. "I suppose the day you came home in such a state you had been to see Rosalie?"

She choked, and nodded.

"Harry deliberately led me into that, though I never realized it until after my talk with papa this morning. I walked into a shabby room in a tumble-down tenement, expecting to find a poor sick woman—and there stood Rosalie, glowing with health and dressed in every detail just as I was. You may imagine the shock she gave me. Of course I knew her—and I knew almost as soon what kind of a life she was leading.

"She never seemed to love me—I don't believe she even loved our mother. She ran away with a traveling theatrical company, and we heard she had died out West. She never even wrote once—it killed my mother. She seemed to have absolutely no heart, no tenderness, no regard for anything. And yet—to look at her you'd think she was an angel.

"I went down on my knees to her. I offered to take her home with me, to give her money to live decently, to do anything to take her out of her horrible life. She pretended to be repentant, but she wouldn't come home with me. It would only make unpleasant talk, she said—she was so like me; but, if I'd give her five thousand dollars she'd go off somewhere where she wasn't known and begin all over again.

"What could I do? I mistrusted her, but she was continually playing upon her likeness to me and copying her clothes after mine. It was a veiled threat to bring notoriety upon me if I did not do as she asked. I didn't dare tell papa—I knew he'd do something that it would be impossible to hush up. I asked Harry's advice——"

"What excuse did Kemble give you for bringing you and your sister together?"

"He said he had run across her in his work for the Commission, and thought I ought to know that a woman so like me was living a notorious life. He pretended not to know the relationship——"

"He lied. He brought Rosalie here to blackmail you."

"I don't doubt it—now. At the time I was much impressed by his consideration. He advised me to pay what she asked, and not to tell my father. He even offered to lend me the money himself—but of course I couldn't permit that."

"But he didn't offer to deliver the letter to P?"

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"He said it wouldn't do for a man in his position. But she didn't keep her word. She kept wanting more and more money, and I was nearly frantic. After P was killed they made it all the harder for me. I had to bring them the money myself, to most unpleasant places." She faltered and blushed. "It was really I you saw at the Soubrette that night—"

"Why was Kemble with you?"

"As an escort. He was very careful about accompanying me when I had to take money to them."

"He was wise!" I laughed bitterly. "Another man would probably have got on to his game. I suppose he used this secret to bring about your engagement?"

"Ye—es. And poor mother was so insistent on it. He *was* a catch, you know."

I took her hands and held them, and tried to make her look at me.

"Virginia, when did you first begin to love me?"

"Mr. Smith!"

"I loved you the first time I laid eyes on you——"

"That was my sister," she interrupted saucily.

"It was you! I saw you getting out of your coupé before your sister elbowed me on the corner; and my heart always knew which was you, if my eyes didn't.

"I—I couldn't kiss poor Rosalie when she lay dead in my arms because some instinct told me that she had never been the woman I loved. I kissed *you*, that day in the house of horrors, in spite of your hatred and fear of me.

"Virginia, I have loved you ever since I first saw you—I believe I have loved you through all my distrust of you—I know I love you now, and must love you forever. Do you think—some day, when I have made something more of myself—you could learn to love the poor secretary?"

"Not 'some day,'" she whispered. "I love you now, John."

IT WAS some time later that Virginia and I went down to the library to tell her father. The gray old Colonel looked up with a beaming smile, and I saw that he had grown young overnight.

"Good morning, Smith!" he gibed. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better," I replied. "Where's Petroleum Central?"

"Right here!" He closed his sinewy fist expressively. "It isn't every secretary that can accomplish wonders while he lies abed." Then he must have noticed something peculiar in my face, for he asked quickly—

"What's up?"

"I have come to hand in my resignation, sir."

The Colonel frowned and stiffened.

"Why?"

"You refused once to allow your secretary to marry your daughter, and I want to be free to ask you for Virginia."

The Colonel winced, then smiled.

"What does Virginia say?" he asked, looking at her with yearning tenderness.

"I said yes," she whispered.

"Suppose I refuse my consent?"

"But you won't!" she cried, running to him and putting her arms about his neck.

Held tight in her embrace, the Colonel could not be as severe with me as he desired.

"From some things Dodge said last night I judge that you came to me under false pretenses, and on a secret mission not altogether honorable?"

"So I did."

"And you are asking me, in spite of that, to consent to your marrying my daughter?"

"I am, sir. I am asking you to judge me by my record as your secretary; and to believe that I, too, have been placed in a false position by the Alphabet."

Slowly the old soldier extended his hand.

"I don't know what you have been, John, but I know what you are. You've shown yourself a man ever since I first found you outfacing Kemble here in this library. If Virginia is sure she loves you, you have my consent."

"I'm very sure!" whispered Virginia, and kissed him ecstatically while I wrung his hand. "But I'm bitterly disappointed, papa. I thought you'd make a dreadful fuss over losing me."

"I'm getting too old to make a fuss," said the Colonel, smiling a little wearily. "I'm going to spend the rest of my days trying to control my temper. If I had been more amenable to reason, things might have come out better."

"You'd have lost your secretary long ago," I suggested.

"Am I really going to lose him now?"

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"I'm afraid you must, sir. I have a bigger job waiting for me—yes, even bigger than you can offer me here."

"What are you hinting at?" cried Virginia anxiously. "Aren't you really John Smith?"

"I'm John Smith, all right—John Waller Smith. Your father understands."

The Colonel did. He sprang to his feet and stood staring at me in amazement.

"Why—why, I know your grandfather!" he stammered.

"I've often heard him speak of you," I returned. Then I turned to the puzzled girl. "Virginia, my big job is running the Waller Smith Mills, and looking after my grandfather's estate. Your father will tell you that the old gentleman is a crank on the handling of employees—he says it's easier to get a man who can make the business pay than to find one who believes a workingman is a human being.

"I've got most of the business end to learn yet—I've been cramming up on the human side of manufacturing. I specialized in sociology in college, took a Ph.D. in it, and then went out to live among the lowest classes—which, according to my grandfather, are recruited largely from men who ought to be honest workingmen.

"For five years I have been traveling over the country, associating with tramps and beggars and crooks, living just as they live—and I've nearly starved at it more than once. I was just ready to quit here and go back to my proper place when Kroner, as the mysterious A, made me an offer so new and so exciting that I decided to take it up. If I'd had any idea what I was getting into I should have run as far and as fast as I could; but I'm glad I didn't, for it enabled me to help your father—and it led me to you."

"And you're a millionaire, instead of a secretary?" asked Virginia disappointedly.

"So many times a millionaire," growled the Colonel, "that my little pile was no temptation to him."

"Are you sorry?" I asked. "Money is a mighty good thing to have."

"I don't care what or who you are," she said, "so long as I'm sure you love me."

And right before her grinning father she put her arms about my neck and kissed me lingeringly.

WITH the information that I could give him the Colonel so directed the Vice Commission that there is one city in the country which is not ruled by the powers of the underworld. Alpha House had been blown up and then fired, and by the time we were able to get into the ruins all proof had been destroyed. The house on Queer Street held no mysteries which I had not uncovered except the secret passage, which proved to open off from behind one of the mirrors that reflected the dummy dead man.

Kemble went down in civic history as a martyr of the Commission's war against vice. Some of the captive Alphabet tried to connect him with their organization, but even the most sensational newspapers scoffed at such an idea. And though a new king succeeded to the social throne, Kemble was never entirely forgotten by the fashionable set which he had led and despised.

Poor Rosalie was buried in a quiet little graveyard; but the modest stone that marks her last resting-place bears a name which has no resemblance to the one which I have called her. Sometimes of a quiet evening Virginia and I stand beside her grave and recall our season of terror while we were blindly fighting the hidden members of the Red Alphabet.

We were married as soon as Virginia's mourning would permit, and I took my wife away from the city where we had suffered so much. The Colonel followed us when he had concluded the Commission's campaign, for Mrs. Fairchild wanted to form more staid friendships where she was not known.

She and the Colonel are quietly happy; but always between them, like a barrier, lies what to Virginia and me is a bond of union—the memory of Kemble, of Dodge, of Kroner—of the whole hideous jumble of letters that composed the Red Alphabet.

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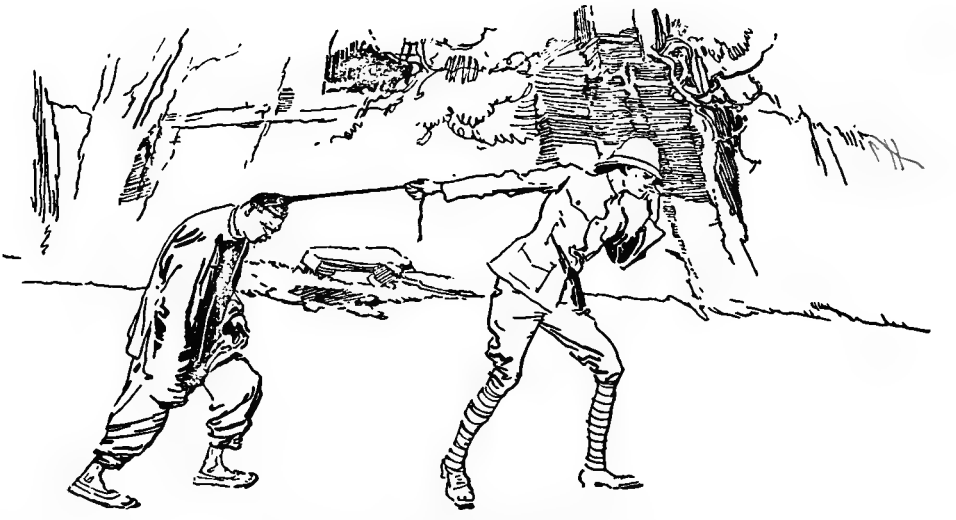

KITE DICKSON—NON-COMBATANT

A TALE OF TIBET

By Gordon McCreagh

Author of "Featuring Morton St. Clair," "The Brass Idol," etc.

THEY had hated each other from the very beginning.

Major Leslie, tall, blond, with a florid face and invisible eyebrows, and an over-inflated conception of his own dignity, was the scion of a family whose store of worldly goods was in the inverse ratio to the blueness of its blood. This unfortunate lack of the more useful commodity precluding his entry into a crack regiment, he had been forced to join the Supply and Transport Corps, where, if the glory were less, the emoluments were correspondingly greater.

He successfully offset the former deficiency by giving strenuous publicity to his full title of Major, the Hon. Scott-Leslie, and treating his subordinates with a proper patrician aloofness. When it is added that he habitually looked out of only one eye, effectually closing the other with a monocle— "'Nuff said!" Withal, after the manner of all his kind, he was a brave man and not a bad soldier.

Dickinson—"Kite" Dickinson—was the diametrical opposite except as to courage. He was the positive pole of the two conflicting forces. The only point of resemblance was height; but whereas the Major was bulky and inclined to puffiness, Dickinson was lean and angular, with the alertness of a hawk and the ungainly joints of a camel, which carried with them a corresponding tirelessness. The perfect dentistry he displayed when he smiled—which was nearly all the time—was alone sufficient to proclaim him an American: one of the pioneer type, with a natural-born and ineradicable aptitude for being where he had no business to be.

He was there now; that is, fifteen thousand feet above sea-level and about four thousand above the highest clouds, in the Jalap-La pass with the Tibet expeditionary force of 1904—or rather "Mission," as the British Government chose to call it.

After several lively years of hunting, exploring, prospecting, and sundry similar exciting and profitless occupations, he had taken up a contract to provide baggage transports for the expedition, and should have been down at the base of operations at Gantok. That is why he was at the front with the advance column.

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It was but natural that two such opposite types should have come into conflict. The Major, who was in charge of the transport facilities for the expedition, thought that all underlings should concede the deference due to a "man of blood" and the wearer of an eye-glass by addressing him as "Sir," and had taken occasion to express his views on the matter very forcibly at an early stage of their dealings together. His very insistence had aroused all the sturdy democratic independence in Dickinson, who was perfectly willing to give him the title which his military rank carried; but he refused to cringe; or as he himself expressed it, "he wasn't goin' to sling valet talk at no suckling duke."

He sat just now like a contemplative stork, hugging a bony great knee on his cot in the tent which he shared with the correspondent of the *Statesman*. His unnaturally serious countenance masked a feeling of sublime and beatific content; he was ragging Major Leslie, and he knew it.

Before him stood the Major, looking very flushed and disgruntled. He had come in to give some trifling instructions about the other's mule-drivers, and had forgotten the issue in his uncontrollable desire to assert his dignity. Dickinson's consistent refusal to rise to his feet and salute when addressed, as the native contractors did, had harried his little soul ever since the beginning of the expedition, and he was now stating his views on the matter with perfervid fluency.

"I am sorry to have to revert to this matter again, Mr. Dickinson," he concluded pompously. "But I consider it my duty to state that your conduct is—er—subversive of discipline."

Everything that did not tend to uphold Major, the Hon. Scott-Leslie's dignity was subversive of discipline.

"Can't follow your line o' reason, Maje," said Dickinson cheerfully. "My drivers give a darn sight less trouble than any o' your nigger contractors, an' I get my mules up on time; quicker than the battery mules too, though I carry a bigger load."

"But, Mr. Dickinson, military discipline *must* be upheld."

Dickinson unhooked his knee and carefully adjusted the other beneath his chin before replying.

"Looks to me like military discipline ain't figurin' in this," he grinned maliciously. "To begin with, your Government says that this picnic ain't no military expedition at all; it's jest a 'Mission under armed escort.' An' to go on with, I'm a non-combatant, as you explained to me gratuitous an' circumstantial when I asked for one or two little camp privileges. I jest hold a plain contrac' with your Government. You're here to look after their end of it, an'——"

"*Pf-rr-rt!*"

Two jagged rents appeared in the canvas above, heralded by the sound of a far-away shot somewhere up on the mountain-side.

Simultaneously with a single gymnastic motion, Dickinson slid off the cot like an otter and extended himself at full length behind some pack-saddles.

"—An' I'm here to look after my end," he continued unconcernedly from that position. "Better come in behind the fire-screen, Major."

Major Leslie had given an involuntary jump, and his monocle had fallen out of his face; but he was of that type of officer which considers it disgraceful to take shelter from bullets, and his fast vanishing temper disappeared entirely at the thought of his display of nervousness. He turned on Dickinson with a snarl:

"You can attend to your end perfectly well from the base, Mr. Dickinson. You seem to forget that you are here only on sufferance."

Dickinson wagged a bony finger at him from the floor.

"Sure on sufferance," he admitted cheerfully. "But with the express permission of Colonel Younghusband, so I could look after my mules an' my men."

The Major opened his mouth to reply, snapped lips together again, gulped, drew himself up and strode out, eating up at least a third of his carefully-trained mustache.

DICKINSON sat up and wrinkled his nose discontentedly as he surveyed the bullet holes above. At the same time the other occupant of the tent emerged from behind the wholly inadequate protection of a despatch-box, and their glances met in the keen amusement of mutual understanding.

"Why do you rag him so unmercifully, Dick?" There was a shade of remonstrance in the newspaper man's tone.

"Why does he try to come the Lord God

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Almighty over me like that? I ain't one of his flunkies back home."

"Oh, well, it wouldn't hurt you to call him 'Sir.' "

"See here, Sanderson," said Dickinson seriously. "Where I come from I'd call my boss by his first name. But I ain't proud; I don't do the haughty over anything that creeps or crawls or stinks; when it comes to a show-down of humility I'm brother to a wood-louse; an' I'd call this misfire earl the Archangel Gabriel if he'd treat me like a white man. But he don't. He gives me a cramp in the vitals every time he opens up with his 'Er—Mistah Dickinsern.' "

Sanderson had to laugh.

"It's a mistake, Dick," he persisted. "He can make trouble for you. But cramp reminds me that it's about supper time." And he groaned dismally.

His unhappiness was explained by the fact that the whole expedition had been on strict rations for the past two weeks.

"Bully beef and hard tack! Oh, my suffering soul!"

A new smile of benign satisfaction spread over Dickinson's face as he laid his finger on his lips with an exaggerated display of caution. He poked his head out of the blanket that hung over the tent-flap and looked both ways; then he slowly dived his hand into a roll of bedding and produced—a can of baked beans!

Sanderson leaped on it with a howl of joy.

"Where'd you get it, Dick?"

The wily man of resource clapped his hand over the other's mouth.

"Sh-sh! You don't have to advertise it; we'd be held up an' robbed if anybody knew."

Sanderson was already hacking at the tin with his pocket-knife.

"Oh, you gem! How did you do it?"

"Ain't I a wiz?" said Dickinson proudly. "That's the first instalment of the food trust."

"Yes, but how? When? There's nothing come up from the base for two weeks, except despatches."

"Despatches is right, son; you've hit it first plunk. Despatches! That is to say, mail-bags. But I ain't takin' any credit; it's jest an accident of nature. The immortal Bill says that a man o' my build is 'fit for treasons, stratagems, an' spoils;' an' I does a bit o' figurin' an' then I forms the trust with O'Loughlin, the Field Post-Office man. I puts it to him how his babu despatcher down to the base can mix some eats surreptitious in with the mails; an' I holds fifty per cent. stock for promotion."

Sanderson gazed at him in undisguised admiration. His soul was too full for words. Incidentally, so was his mouth.

At intervals a far-away shot rang out from the lone sniper among the rocks above.

Late that night Sanderson was awakened by Dickinson swearing softly to himself as he rummaged for something to patch the rents in the tent with.

"Right above my head, gol darn him," he heard him complain. "An' it's blowin' minus a hundred in the shade outside."

And a little later, following on a shot which had preceded a shriek somewhere in the camp:

"Sanderson! Oh, Sandy! I'm goin' out an' get that louse-bitten sniper in the morning."

Sanderson grunted a sleepy approval. Although his occupation was strictly non-military, he was by no means devoid of that pleasant lust for battle, murder and sudden death which actuates us all at times, especially when the opposing side is actively engaged in displaying a similar interest. Besides he had no fear for Dickinson. Dickinson was injury-proof—as he himself often complained, just because he carried an accident policy for a scandalous sum.

Early as Dickinson was the following morning, he found active preparations in hand for a regular expedition against the sniper. That industrious gentleman had been dropping long-range shots on and off throughout the night into the camp, to the occasional detriment and continual annoyance of the Queen's Own Regiment, and of the Gurkhas who lay alongside of them.

Big, soft-nosed Snider bullets make a horrible wound, and arriving at intervals out of the cold dark to strike no one knows where, they will do more to edge up the nerves of a regiment than anything else in warfare. The company commanders had been kept busy throughout the freezing night going about among the men, and their tempers were savage. They prayed for the morning and vengeance; and Lieutenant Wilson of the Gurkhas had bet heavily on certain marksmen of his company in regimental rivalry with Captain Train of the Queen's Own.

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The result was a string of khaki-clad figures skirmishing out among the boulders and snow toward the cliff where the Tibetan danced and howled in evident delight at the honor done him. Dickinson unobtrusively slipped in amongst them.

"Sight for five hundred, men," sang out Wilson.

"*Six* hundred, Queen's Own!" corrected Train. "You've got to allow for the clear air and the elevation, Wilson."

"*Eight* hundred!" muttered Dickinson from the extreme right, with the knowledge born of much mountain-shooting experience.

Captain Train flushed angrily, and as Wilson grinned at him, resolved mentally to speak to "that cheeky Tommy" at a future occasion.

One or two shots commenced to spit from behind the rocks, and the Tibetan lay down at the edge of his cliff, from where he began to return the fire with enthusiasm. Dickinson grunted with the hunter's inborn scorn of the machine-made marksman.

"Don't any of 'em know enough to try a sighting shot?"

He picked out a little lichen-covered patch on the black cliff face and fired. A splinter of rock shaled off at the extreme upper edge and was followed by a roar of laughter.

"You've got a fine shot there, Train," gibed Wilson; and the other gnashed his teeth.

Dickinson looked around in quick amazement, which changed to a wide grin at their appalling ignorance. Then, "Seven-fifty!" he amended to himself, and waiting his chance till the sniper's head and shoulders appeared again, fired quickly.

The Tibetan's rifle flew from his hand and fell like a plummet till it struck a projection several hundred feet below, where it disintegrated like a pyrotechnic bomb, while the man sprawled forward and hung with his head and arms swinging over the cliff-edge.

"Oh, pretty! Pretty, indeed!" shouted Train. "I'll take the two hundred in notes, Wilson." Then, to Dickinson: "That was a fine shot, my man. What company are you in?"

Dickinson shuffled his big feet awkwardly. With the modesty of true genius he hated praise, and he blew uncomfortably through the barrel of his rifle before replying.

"No comp'ny, Cap'n. I'm jest contractin' for transport."

The officer gasped. He had intended to reward the shot with a condescending present of ten rupees; but there was no precedent for this in the whole drill-book.

"Wh—what? Why?" he spluttered. "A contractor? Why, —— it, man, you're a non-combatant; you've got no business to be here."

"Non-combatant. No business." Dickinson was used to this. His awkwardness vanished, to give place to amazed disgust.

"Well! Now wouldn't that jar you? If that don't beat— Aw, what's the use? I pass!" He gave up wearily.

"Eh—what?"

"I mean 'Really now,' or 'My word, dontcher know,' or somep'n like that." And he fled incontinently.

Insult upon injury! The indignant officer was on the verge of apoplexy; and Wilson's obvious joy goaded him to see a perfect mirage of red carnage.

"—— it!" he snorted at length. "That's Leslie's fault! Why the devil can't he keep his men in hand?" It was evident that the aristocratic Major was not as highly appreciated as he might have wished. "I'll talk to the Honorable! By Jove, I will!"

And he did—in forceful terms, loaded with disapproval.

THE day's march was an awful grind. Road, of course, there was none. An icy torrent zigzagged down the pass, which had to be forded about twenty times as the column progressed, slipping and scrambling over the drifted snow and piled boulders. The military sweated and swore; and the transport drivers, according to immemorial custom, developed all the ills known to science, and with startling Oriental ingenuity discovered several new ones.

When Captain Train finally found himself in the vicinity of Major Leslie, the souls of both men yearned for murder as a pleasant diversion and slight relief. There ensued an acrimonious conversation in which "discipline" and "impertinent interference" figured largely on both sides. Bloodshed was avoided by the Captain suddenly disappearing in a seven-foot drift hole.

Major, the Hon. Scott-Leslie, prayed for his immediate death and passed on, communing with his lacerated soul in a series of

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explosive snorts, which finally terminated in swearing a mighty oath that he would interview Colonel Younghusband that very evening and get Dickinson ordered back to the base of operations.

As he reflected on the long list of indignities to which he had been subjected at the hands of that cheerful malefactor he almost rejoiced to think that such a course would inevitably inflict serious loss on the latter; for native *Dorabis* without the restraining humanitarian influence of white supervision will kill off transport animals as fast as anthrax.

But his amiable intentions did not materialize in just the way he had proposed. Late that afternoon the sweating column came upon the first and only real resistance during the whole expedition—the *sangar* at Rangpo. Here the Tibetans had piled a rude barricade of rocks, and exhorted by the militant lamas were prepared to resist the advance toward the sacred city with a fearsome assortment of archaic guns, and weird cannon made of fire-hardened bamboo bound with brass wire, and obsolete lacquered armor, and here and there a semi-modern rifle.

The interpreter sent forward by Colonel Younghusband to try to negotiate for peace was shot down by a frenzied lama, and then the engagement began.

"Engagement" is inadequate. It was a massacre. In half an hour the remnant was swarming over the ridges to disappear like blown mist. For the rest of the advance the country was deserted as if a pestilence had swept it.

The men were nearly dead with the day's work, but it was imperative to send a detachment forward to occupy the farther end of the pass about ten miles beyond. It was equally imperative, in that climate, that they should have shelter when they got there.

Colonel Younghusband sent for Major Leslie. The Major said it was impossible. Such a day's march in such a country had been even harder on the pack-animals than on the men, and they couldn't stand it.

Colonel Younghusband said it was absolutely necessary; and the Major was grudgingly forced to admit that if any man in his train could drive his men any farther in the present circumstances it was Dickinson; further, that Dickinson's mules were the best-fed and strongest in the whole camp.

Colonel Younghusband sent for Dickinson. Dickinson calmly went into figures. He accurately detailed a mule's full load and the limit of its endurance, and explained that if forced to go farther at least half of them would die on the march.

The Colonel repeated that it was necessary; Dickinson pointed out the injustice of it, when it had been admitted that the battery mules carrying the screw-guns could go no farther.

"It is a necessity of war, Mr. Dickinson," insisted the Colonel not unkindly. "I'm sorry for you; but it is the risk of warfare, and the men *must* have food and shelter."

Dickinson's lean jaw set as he saw before him the complete financial failure of his venture; but he had taken chances all his life, and this was by no means the first time that luck had run against him.

"Very well, Colonel," he said. "I'll drive 'em; but it'll bust me higher'n a kite."

He was unwontedly serious when he rushed into his tent to snatch a mouthful of food before setting out—so much so that Sanderson asked him what was wrong. Dickinson explained.

"Ah-h!" said Sanderson. "I told you he could make trouble for you."

"Nope! Guess you're wrong, Sandy. This pin-head lord don't love me any, an' he's got the brains of a Silurian fish; but I'll give him the credit for not putting this thing over on me with malice an' aforethought."

"Does it break you very bad, Dick?" inquired Sanderson solicitously.

Dickinson threw back his wide shoulders and laughed. The first shock of his disappointment was over; and he had always taken the lean years with the same cheerful inconsequence as he did the fat ones.

"Well, not so bad that I'll never be able to crawl up again. Y'see, it's this way. This contrac' don't amount to a whole lot, but I figured if I could sell my mules agen after the whole picnic was over I'd clear a good an' fair profit. So I traded for the best there was, an' I got some sixty-odd at two hundred apiece. Now, that's big money for mules, an' if they takes an' dies off on me, the contrac' don't begin to cover it."

"D'you think they'll die?"

"Sure," said Dickinson with conviction. "Most of 'em. I'm durn sorry for the beasts; it sure looks like their last lap."

Then he went out to drive them according to "the necessity of war."

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A FEW days later the remnant was strung out in a long plodding line on the great Tibetan plateau. Dickinson trudged along by Sanderson's side and assisted him whole-heartedly in anathematizing the entire country, the while his eyes swept the landscape like a predatory hawk. Their discontent was heightened by the fact that the food trust was not yielding dividends. The intervals of communication with the base were getting longer and longer, and the weight of the mail-bags was a matter of much moment.

"When I was a kid," complained Dickinson, "teacher useter tell me that this was a table-land infested with Tibetans, turquoises an' tea trees. Now, 'cept'n we ain't climbin' through a hole in the sky no longer, this here don't meet my requirements for a tea table; it looks like sections of the Grand Cañon cut up an' left lyin' around promiscuous. I ain't seen a turquoise, an' there ain't been a leaf in sight for three weeks. I always did think I knew more'n that teacher anyhow."

"Yes," chimed in Sanderson. "And the Tibetans are as scarce as the rest of the list."

"Aw, shucks! The landscape is fairly crawlin' with Tibetans; only they ain't feelin' like comin' in an' say how-do."

Sanderson laughed.

"Wrong that time, Dick! The Colonel says he only wishes they could catch some prisoners to get some information out of; but the scouts always report the country is deserted."

"Huh!" grunted Dickinson. "Scouts? Them town-bred Tommies? There ain't a scout in the whole outfit. I seen signs all the while; an' you jest ask some o' them Gurkha fellers."

"Impossible, Dick! There can't be any population here, because there's nothing for them to eat."

Dickinson halted with an explosive exclamation, and brought his hand down on Sanderson's shoulder with a delighted smack which sent him sprawling into a ready snow drift. The indignant newspaper man crawled out and launched forth on a luridly earnest peroration; but the other cut him short with a voice of dramatic intensity.

"Son, d'you think these Tibetans really eat?"

"Of course they do, you blighted idiot!"

"Then it follows natcherly that they carry their commissariat around with them."

"Oh, Hades! I suppose so—if there are any."

"Sandy, boy, I'm goin' out an' collect a prisoner."

"Oh, you're crazy! No one's allowed to leave the line of march, and there's not a live thing within a hundred miles. And if there were you'd get knocked on the head, and— Oh, what's the use?"

Dickinson was grinning expansively and quietly helping himself to cartridges from the other's belt.

"If you treat a nigger to a dose o' cleanin' rod, he's like to show you everything he owns," he quoted softly. "Just order your supper, son. What'll you have? Call early an' avoid the rush."

Half an hour later the rear guard came up with Dickinson limping painfully along. One of the men sympathetically handed him a priceless stub of tallow candle.

"Feet guv out?" he inquired. "'Ere y'are. Shave a bit int' yer socks; that'll set 'em right."

Dickinson gratefully complied, and for a while kept up bravely; but presently he began to fall behind again.

"Guess I got a frozen toe, fellers. I gotta take my boot off."

He sat down on a rock and the column plodded on.

Two hundred yards separated them when the same soldier sang out:

"'Arf a mo', Sergeant. That Yankee beggar ain't caught up yet, an' 'e's got me taller."

"All right!" yelled Dickinson. "I'm a-comin', fellers."

The column swung 'round a bend; and Dickinson raced off up the mountain side with a silent chuckle.

Three hours passed. The Sergeant was frantic; he had let a man fall behind, and he was now lost, cut off perhaps. The owner of the candle goaded him further by complaining loudly about his irretrievable loss.

A loud hail from behind relieved the tension. Two hundred men turned like one and behind the spectacle of an angular scarecrow holding his nose with one hand, and with the other leading an indignant, unwilling Tibetan by the pigtail.

The captor handed his prisoner over with deep relief.

"Take him away from me, Sergeant.

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I'd sooner ride herd to a flock of camels. Phe-ew! He ain't never washed since the world began."

A dozen men sprang forward to take the prisoner, and deft hands swiftly explored him for possible plunder. Dickinson's face was inscrutable as he strode forward to take his place in the center with the transport.

Later, Sanderson saw the Sergeant hurrying the Tibetan to the front, and pulled up in wondering admiration to wait for Dickinson.

"What did you get?" he inquired hungrily.

Dickinson shrugged disgustedly.

"The assay don't pan out to expectations. All he gave me was a curio, a little tin shrine with a god in it, an' about two pounds o' cheese."

"Gave, nothing! Catch a Tibetan giving you anything! Let's see!"

"Well, I hadda jump on him from a cliff about a mile high, an' I mighta been a trifle hasty an' ungentle like," admitted Dickinson as he produced a beautiful little silver case set with turquoise matrix containing a bronze Buddha, and a large lump of unappetizing-looking stuff almost black with grease and as hard as a billet of wood.

Sanderson whooped and pounced on the latter.

"Yak's milk!" he exclaimed. "Dick, you're a gr-reat man! Golly, ain't it filthy, though. The dirty cannibal must have carried it next to his skin for months; we'll have to scrape at least a pound off it. Hide it away good. I've got to hurry to the front and see if there's any copy in the information they get out of the fellow."

When Sanderson saw Dickinson again, camp had long since been pitched, and the latter was sitting hunched up like a dejected flamingo, engaged in abstruse intellectual meditation.

"It ain't no use," he announced mournfully. "I can't wash that skunk smell outen it."

"Skunk? Out of what?"

"That there sample o' cheese. See that mule across there—that sick-lookin' one with his ears flopped over? Well I give him the scrapin's. Sandy, I tell you that cuss musta been on the edge of everlastin' dissolution from hopeless and irredeemable decay. What's all the other news?"

"You!" said Sanderson. "The whole staff is talking about you. They're glad to get the prisoner; but Murray is sore because you put it over on his scouts, and they all agree that you had no business to be there at all, and——"

Dickinson expanded visibly.

"An' did they say I was a non-combatant?"

Sanderson nodded.

"An' discipline? Did they talk about discipline?" His eagerness was almost pathetic.

"Oh, yes; they said your conduct was antagonistic to discipline."

Dickinson straightened up. He radiated cheerfulness.

"Dear boys," he murmured. "I'd 'a' been disappointed if they'd 'a' left out discipline."

"But that's not all," continued Sanderson. "The fellow made an awful howl that you had looted him, and——"

"Looted?" exclaimed Dickinson with a look of sorrowful reproach. "An' he gave it to me without a murmur—I was jest holdin' him easy with his own back-hair switch around his neck. My faith in human nature is shook. But he can have it back, every ounce but the shavin's what the mule eat."

"Oh, he didn't mention the cheese at all."

"He didn't? I ain't surprised any. P'raps the man he'd saved it for is dead already. When are they comin' for the tin tobacker box?"

Sanderson looked mystified.

"Now that's the funny part of it, Dick," he said. "The beggar said he wouldn't take it back; he had an incoherent story about it's being one of seven identical others, and about the curse of somebody falling on him for losing it and you for robbing it, and he couldn't wipe out his end by taking it back, and a whole lot more."

"Aw, they usually have somep'n like that," commented Dickinson carelessly. "What'd the Colonel say?"

"The Colonel was very annoyed indeed. He talked about his 'mission' and a 'policy of propitiation,' and said he was in two minds about sending you back; only he felt sort of sorry for you about the mules you had to lose the other day."

"H'm! Good for him!" grunted Dickinson. "Not that it would make much odds now, anyway; I ain't got no stock worth stayin' for. Well, all that's mighty interesting, but it don't help out the grub proposition any."

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He shrank into his blanket and resumed his melancholy attitude of hugging his knees and whistling through his teeth, while he watched the pale stars creep out above the saddleback ridge which overhung the camp.

IN A sheltered cranny nestled a low, dark monastery, the location of which could now be determined only by the tall bamboo poles of its prayer flags, standing out in sharp silhouette against a burnt-umber sky. A thin wind rustling among its little swinging bells carried down soft tones plaintively suggestive of loneliness. Little fires sprang up through the camp throwing grotesque shadows of huddled men trying to work up a semblance of enthusiasm over their crude cooking. Sanderson was similarly engaged over his own and Dickinson's share of rations, and groaned dismally over his occupation from time to time.

Suddenly Dickinson rose to his feet.

"That settles it!" he announced decisively.

"Hey, what's bitten you?" inquired Sanderson with but faint interest.

"Sandy, my son, we're goin' to have some supper after all."

"Yes, I know. Hard tack and bully beef, with bully beef and hard tack for dessert."

"Nope, not this time. I dunno what it's goin' to be, but it's somep'n different—I gotta strike the lode some time."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Dickinson's eyes twinkled with a resurrected interest in life, and his whole bearing showed that his guardian angel had been ousted for the time being by the irresponsible imp that was always leading him into trouble.

"D'you see that old barn up there? Well, there's some one in it, an' he's got somep'n to eat."

"Oh, rats! It's deserted, like everything else in this blasted country. The scouts——"

"I tell you they ain't a scout in the pack. Now listen. Before it fell dark I set here contemplatin' on the Infinite, same as this Dalai-Lama sharp we're goin' to call on at Lhassa does for three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, an' I observes presently the gymnastics of a bunch of them magpies. They circles around an' alights somewheres out o' sight up there; then they rises with a squawk all in a flurry. That means somep'n alive, probably man. An' jest now I hears a sharp little yelp same as when you kick a yellow dog in the ribs for puttin' his nose in the cook-pot. That means meat. Spelt lower case, 'cause monks has always had a habit o' corrallin' the eats. An' I'm darn well goin' up an' roust the bloated hog out."

"Are you sure?" whispered Sanderson with a momentary thrill of eager anticipation. Then he shook his head with a return of dejection. "But what's the use? The sentries will never let you out of the camp."

Dickinson smiled easily.

"Man, them ain't sentries; them's sheep-herders. An' anyhow, in this kind o' ground with them rocks, sentries ain't no more use than for somep'n for the enemy to shoot at. Now you set quiet an' keep the fire a-goin' while I goes to market."

Fifteen minutes later Dickinson crouched at the edge of the artificial level on which the monastery stood. Past master in the art of stalking as he was, he had experienced no difficulty in slipping between the sentries and out of the camp, though he had found it necessary to leave his rifle, which he could not keep from making an alarming clatter against the rocks in the dark. The danger of such a proceeding never entered into his head. Danger never seemed to figure in his irresponsible calculations; and the mischievous imp that led him into it always seemed to bring him back in at least repairable condition.

He listened, and was delightedly aware of low-muttered conversation inside. Like a snake he wormed himself over the ground and reached the door. The monastery was the typical long barrack, consisting of a single low-roofed hall with a door at either end, entirely bare of furniture or trappings except for a large image of the Buddha in the attitude of meditation. There was a small fire at the foot of the image, and before it sat two lamas, the younger of whom continually stirred something in a pot. Beside them on a mat lay what looked like the half of a kid around which a gaunt pie-dog circled hungrily.

Dickinson sniffed. The odor from the pot pervaded the room and filtered out through the cracked door with a most tantalizing invitation. He sniffed again, more deeply. And that was his undoing.

The dog burst out in the appalling clamor of mingled fear and defiance that only a

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nondescript cur is capable of. Sudden onslaught seemed Dickinson's only course now. He rushed in as if he were but the first of a whole company.

The old lama shrieked and cowered in a corner; the younger man leaped for the back door and wrestled with the fastenings. He tore it open and rushed to the assistance of the old man, who seemed paralyzed with fright; then noticing that in all this time nobody had followed Dickinson, he hesitated — he seemed brave enough — and jerked out something in Tibetan.

Dickinson waved his hands semaphorically with amiable intent and tried to indicate the provender.

From the camp below floated up a confused disturbance. This seemed to worry the lama. Suddenly he darted behind the image and emerged with a primeval wheellock blunderbus which he pointed threateningly.

The situation had suddenly become serious.

Dickinson crouched with a vague hope of dodging, and an infinite trust in his good angel—or rather devil.

"Now put that siege gun down," he expostulated with a ridiculous disregard of time and place. "I'd hate to see you blow yourself up, an' if a splinter should hit me, I'm apt to get real vexed."

The lama made a threatening movement, and Dickinson leaped aside, bringing himself nearer the old man who yelped aloud. Some one below fired a shot; and that settled it.

The blunderbus roared, and Dickinson felt a shrapnel blast of nails, pot-leg, and hammered wire hurtle past his head.

The next instant he had dived in and gripped the young priest around the waist.

Like all Tibetans, the man was sturdy as a tree, and willingly grappled with the lean white man whom he expected to break with ease; but Dickinson was of the drawn-wire type that possesses an amazing strength when put to it. Locked together, they fought all over the floor with cracking muscles.

Crash! They staggered against the image, which rocked from its base with the shock. They swung away, straining chest to chest, and fell over the old man who yelped again; but the very extremity of his fear gave him courage to beat at the white man's head with the heavy iron pen-case which hung at his girdle. Dickinson felt his mind slipping and gathered himself for an effort. He managed to release a leg and drive it against his new assailant's ribs with a force that rolled him gasping and wheezing right out at the door.

Then they shook free and sprang to their feet. Dickinson immediately rushed into a clinch to rest while his head cleared, and was whirled around by his opponent.

Crash! Against the image again. He felt better now, and put his leg back to get a purchase against his antagonist who was trying to crush him against the figure.

Crash! The whole thing came down this time, full over the culinary operations, and the two rolled together in a steaming wreckage of baked-clay sherds, and straw, and bundles of dirty cloth with which it was stuffed.

Dickinson was half stunned. The lama sprang to his feet with a yell of dismay, groped swiftly in the faint light thrown by the remnant of the fire for the bundles, and leaped out at the door.

WHEN the excited storming party arrived from below they discovered Dickinson, lighted by a fast-diminishing stub of tallow candle, sitting among the ruins. In one hand he clasped a section of goat, and with the other he was pressing what had once been a handkerchief to a wide gash over his eye. The expression on his countenance was one of seraphic content.

"Gorblime! 'Enged if it ain't the bloomin' Yankee again!" exclaimed a soldier. "Strike me pink if 'e don't need a nurse, too——"

He was interrupted by an agonized shriek from a comrade who rushed forward and indignantly possessed himself of the candle.

"Ow, the robber! 'E's burnin' me taller dip wot 'e swiped!"

"'Ere, come orf it! Give us a light will yer!"

An officer arrived and pushed his way to the front. He surveyed the scene in astonishment; then he grimly assisted Dickinson to his feet, still clutching his precious piece of meat.

In this condition he was haled before Colonel Younghusband, to explain as best he might.

Half an hour later, his head neatly bandaged, Dickinson returned to his own fireside, his features split in a wide grin.

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"Little Willie's been a wicked, wicked boy," he announced. "He has left undone those things which he ought to have done, an' he has done those things which he ought not to have done; he's been a non-combatant again; an' he's ruined all the discipline in the whole world. An' he's got to go right back home with tomorrow's despatches—special delivery on his account. The Colonel hadn't figured on sendin' for a day or two yet, but he reckons he can put on a spurt jest to get rid of me. He sure done me up proud."

Sanderson looked at him in amazement.

"You seem darned happy about it," he remarked.

"Well, you *are* hard to please. Look at the supper I got for us!"

"Dick, you're a genius for finding supper—and trouble; but will that recompense you for having to leave the remnant of your stock in charge of the *Dorabis?*"

The grin on Dickinson's face spread wider. He drew Sanderson by the sleeve into the shelter of the tent.

From some ragged receptacle in his shirt he produced a bundle of dirty cloth.

Slowly he unrolled it, and disclosed a little pile of rough turquoise pebbles.

"Guess they'll pay for the mules," he chuckled. Then his eyes twinkled with a new delight. "I'll have ter tell the incipient lordling after it's all over an' we square up accounts. *Won't* he be mad!"

DOWN *by the* RIO GRANDE

A SANDY BOURKE STORY

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Greenstone Mask," "The Island of the Dead," etc.

JEFF DAVIS COUNTY, Texas, has four irregular sides enclosing four unequal angles. In bigger words it is a tetragonal quadrangle, or a rhombus or something equally unsatisfactory to the lay mind. In plain language two of its straight sides are short and two long. The long ones nose down at an acute angle to the Rio Grande for a drink and a peep at Mexico between the Van Horn and Vieja Mountains. The Davis Mountains have got the center of

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the county rumpled up from north to south, with a lot of streams running out of them eastward to join a main fork of the Pecos. At the southern angle Twin Mountains rise, with more creeks forming Alamito, which swells the Rio Grande after watering Presidio County.

Two railroads cut through Jackson County, either side of the Davis Mountains, the Espee and the Peevey Ess. Outside of their townlets, and Fort Davis, you can count the settlements of Jeff Davis on the fingers of one hand.

But it's some place to live in for all that or because of it, maybe, according to your disposition. There are parks tucked away in the crinkly cañons of the Davis Range, like plums in pie-crust, sheltered, timbered and well grassed, with good, sweet water—ideal cattle ranges. There are long, deep cañons with red cliffs chafed by streams that turn to raging torrents in rain-time, rugged, picturesque ravines. There is a high plateau that is hard to beat for grazing ground, if it is set with cactus.

It's the real setting for Lasca, with the "free life" and the "fresh air" and "the canter after the cattle," wild but lovable, a country that steals into the affections like a wayward child, never quite absent in thought, always a little favored above the rest, however full of present charm.

Thirty miles from Rubio, on the Espee, up under the shadow of Baldy Peak, is the Curly O ranch, the "Curly O" standing for the initial of Quimby, who had long since made his fortune out of fat three-year-olds and was handling the bulls of Wall Street with a vigor that commanded equal success.

"Babs" Barton — full name Barbara —daughter of the up-to-date superintendent of the Curly O, often drove to Rubio with her father in the buckboard behind the slashing bays when the cattle shipment was big enough to warrant his personal supervision, starting the morning after the drive and reaching town with the easygoing steers.

Then Babs would go visiting with a special girl chum and run the gamut of Rubio's attractions — ice - cream sodas, "truly" candy, fresh ribbons and fripperies at the store, new magazines, and a matinée at the Star Cinematographic Theater. The evening was always sacred to the bewilderment and enslaving of some unfortunate Rubioan, and, according to Barton's raillery of his motherless daughter, the real object of the sixty-mile trip—down one morning, back the next day, thirty miles down the hill and up again.

BABS and her chum, duly ensconced at the matinée, divided their time between the pictures, a box of candy, and the man who sat next to Babs, unconscious of his surroundings, engrossed in the screen. The girls decided in the half light that he was not handsome but likable.

Babs, who esteemed herself an expert in matters equine and bovine, approved his absorption in the film which showed the annual Cowboy Carnival and Contest at Cheyenne, and she liked the way he sat his chair as if it were a horse, with his shoulders back but all his muscles easy. His hair was sandy and his eyes were blue-gray. He would stand, she figured, pretty close to six feet and ride about a hundred and seventy pounds of well-strung frame. In youth his freckles had probably made him a shining mark for youthful wits, but the merciful tan had blended them to hardly distinguishable inlays.

He wore none of the costume that characterized the figures on the screen—save a silk handkerchief in lieu of a tie—but Babs did not need the testimony of his attitude and his *sotto voce* remarks to set him down as a cowman, and a good one.

Through the rough-riding exhibition he sat his chair riding with the prize-winners thrown into flickering action on the sheet, swaying as they swayed, balancing as they balanced, with comments that were both expert and audible.

"Oh, you steamboat! You li'l ol' sunfishin', side-weavin' son of a wild hawss! Ride him, you ol' son of a gun. Ride him. Thataboy! Whoopee!"

He looked around quickly, shame-faced at the sound of his own voice, but, reassured by the faces of the girls who sternly repressed their laughter, he turned to the screen again, rumpling his soft Stetson in his hands as the sub-title announced the Rope-tieing Championship of the World.

It was the turn of his neighbors to comment on the film.

"This is it, Claire," whispered Babs. "I hope the pictures are good. There he is."

The frank face of a young man, evidently unconscious of the greedy camera, broke out upon the curtain, the friendly lips parting

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in a winning smile, eyes a little puckered from the sun, unembarrassed, suddenly nodding recognition to a friend as the picture passed. The sub-title had already announced his name as the winner of the contest, John Redding.

A steer hurtled along to the clicking of the projecting machine. Behind came a lithe form on a Pinto pony, a modern centaur, man and animal moving as one, alert, cat-like as they followed the steer. An arm swung, a lariat straightened in the air, its sinuous loop settling over both horns, the rider took a swift turn about his saddle-horn as he lifted a leg for the dismount—and the ruthless film-producer cut the scene.

The next picture was heralded in a cloud of dust out of which emerged the beef, his neck stretched by the line kept taut by the watchful Pinto pony and the rider smoothly adjusting thongs about the protesting hoofs of the steer.

The sandy-haired one was jerking his head forward with every move of the rider on the screen, the girls leaned forward eagerly, Babs' hand on her friend's arm. Beyond them a stout drummer smirked at the two girls appraisingly, smiling cynically at their enthusiasm from shallow eyes.

The picture blanked out, the sub-title took its place. Fifty people read it aloud to the annoyance of five times their number:

HOG-TIED IN FORTY-NINE SECONDS.

"You son of a gun, you sure-swingin', handy-tyin' son of a gun," murmured the expert.

"I thought it was forty-eight and a half, Claire," said Barbara. "Aren't you proud of him? I wish he was my cousin instead of yours."

"Are you sure of that, Babs?" quizzed her chum. "You said you didn't believe in cousins——"

Barbara cut short the sentence by nipping her friend's arm a trifle viciously and produced a protesting "Ouch!"

"Friend of yours, ladies?" asked the drummer, turning his massaged but flabby face toward them.

The girls gave him a swift glance, and, by the peculiar process granted their sex, transported themselves a thousand miles away to a zone appreciably chilly. The drummer grinned.

"Needn't to get huffy," he said. "I go to Cheyenne myself for that show, regular. Like to see the prize-winners, girls as well. Though I needn't have gone so far to see them."

The girls stared hard at the crudely colored local advertisements filling in between the films.

"Here's my card," persisted their tormentor, "Fancy waists is my line. I'm staying at the National. If you girls would like to look over my samples we might find something to strike your fancy. About thirty-four, eh?"

The two girls, ignoring the card, looked fixedly ahead, biting their lips. Tears were very close to the lids of Claire Ashton, Babs' face was red and her fingers itched for connection with the drummer's fat cheek. The man beside her noted their attitude and the cause of it. He hesitated a moment, flushing, then turned to Barbara.

"I beg yo' pahdon, but would you-all like to change seats?" he asked.

THE tone of his voice, tinctured with the Southern softness welcome to Texan ears, produced the opposite effect from that of the drummer. The girls came back from the frigid zone—that is, Claire did, Babs had already passed to the torrid belt. Barbara's brown eyes met the blue-gray ones, estimating and appreciating their sincerity.

"Thank you," she said. "But we're going now."

The girls adjusted their hats and started to rise, finding the way blocked by the insistent drummer, turned squarely in his seat, one arm across the back of the vacant chair ahead of him.

"Ah, don't get mad at nothing," he said. "Be sports. Wait till the end and we'll take a walk down to the sample-rooms and pick out a waist. I picked you for live ones when I followed you in."

The girls sat back, both pale now and very upright. The audience, many of whom they knew, were beginning to glance their way.

The sandy-haired cowman got up quietly.

"If you-all 'll pahdon me," he said, "I'll go out first."

He passed cleverly in front of them, hardly touching their skirts, then unceremoniously swept aside the fat legs of the drummer, and, passing that disgruntled individual,

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gathered the lapels of his fancy waistcoat and his carefully displayed tie in a grip that was not to be denied.

"As he stepped into the aisle, the stout, protesting man, only able to speak in a muffled whisper, followed him willy-nilly, smoothly, quietly, resistlessly to one side, leaving the way clear for the grateful girls who made their way swiftly up the aisle.

The cowboy followed, trailed by the drummer, furious, crimson, smoothing his disordered attire.

In the entrance the girls paused to let them pass. The drummer tapped the cowboy on the shoulder belligerently.

"Who in —— do you think you are?" he blustered. "You attend to your own business or you'll get in wrong!"

The cowboy surveyed him calmly, with a glint in his steady narrowed eyes that seemed to cool the belligerence of his challenger.

"Ef you want to know who I am," he drawled, "my name's Sandy Bourke. As fer my bus'ness, I'm tendin' to it. I herd cattle as a rule but I sometimes make a specialty of trainin' hawgs. You-all want another lesson?"

The man tried to outstare him but failed to hold the eyes with the cold gleam that suggested crouching menace. He caught a titter from the girls and turned away muttering in a careful undertone.

Sandy Bourke watched him much as he would have regarded a troublesome steer leaving the corral after branding, and proceeded to twist a cigarette in the fingers of one hand. As he raised it to his lips he became bewilderedly aware of a small, white hand outstretched apparently to meet his own, a pair of dancing, grateful brown eyes, a gleam of white teeth between red lips and a voice calling him by name.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Bourke," it said in charming accents. "I've heard of you often."

Sandy dropped his cigarette in sheer embarrassment.

"I'm Barbara Barton of the Curly O, and this is my chum, Claire Ashton."

"The Curly O?" Sandy came to his faculties, enlivened by the burning of his fingers with the match he still held for the spoiled cigarette, and took the hands the girls held out to him, much as he would have received some fragrant, delicate blossom.

"Yes," went on Barbara. "There are two saddle-chums of yours working for dad. Joe Peters and Sam Manning. They are always talking about you."

"Joe Peters! Mormon Joe Peters and Sodywater Sam?"

The girl nodded laughingly.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!"

"So I recognized you when you gave your name."

"Answered the description, freckles, hair an' all," supplied Sandy who was beginning to feel more at ease, though to quote himself, "females, 'specially gels, allus make me feel as if I'd been sent for an' couldn't come."

"Dad calls you 'The Three Musketeers,' you know."

"Wal, miss, I 'low I'm on the corral post order of arcitectuah myself, but Joe, he's some hefty. So's Sam. An' none of us ever aimed to sting unless we had to."

The girl looked puzzled.

"Oh," she said at last, dimpling, "you thought I meant mosquitoes?"

"Yes, miss. Muskeeters, or musketeers, whichever way you pronounce it."

"These were three comrades, soldiers of France, long ago, who did all sorts of brave things. I'll lend you the book."

"Thank you, miss. Thet drummer now, he was more on the muskeeter order. I shore would hev liked to squash him, for luck. I was aimin' to ride oveh to the Curly O termorreh. Me an' Pete—thet's my li'l hawss. We been driftin' quite a piece an' we aimed to settle awhile in Texas. I kindeh tho't of mixin' up over the river in Mexico, but things has quieted down along the bordeh. I didn't know Joe an' Sam was up to the Curly O—thet's shore good news—but I know yore dad—of him, leastwise. The Curly O and Misteh Barton's shore got some reputation 'mong us riders.

"Dad's in town," said Barbara. "I know he'll have room for you. Come down to Claire's with us, now. Dad's talking freight with Mr. Ashton."

"Why, I——"

"Do come. He'll want to thank you, too. Is your horse here?"

"I put Pete in the barn. Treated him while I took in the show. He's bin shy on oats of late. But——"

"You must come. Mustn't he, Claire?"

Claire, a giggling, plump personality in pink ruffles, added her importunities, and

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Sandy, feeling all arms and legs and freckles, walked, as he had never walked before, down the street, flanked by two pretty girls who regarded him with evident approval and led him—much as they would a newly acquired Saint Bernard or, for a better simile, a wolfhound—captive to the Ashton household.

"BOURKE," said Mr. Barton the next afternoon in the office of the Curly O, "I can always find room for a man like you, entirely aside from the obligation I'm under. I've got a job right in your line, from what Joe and Sam tell me. They say you're handy on the draw."

He glanced at the business-like Colts that swung from Sandy's hips. The cowboy was dressed in his working clothes, worn leather chaps, flannel shirt open at the bronzed neck, spurred and belted, his soft Stetson in his hands.

"I ain't exactly what you'd call a gunman," he answered deprecatingly. "I can shoot some, but——"

"I'm not necessarily calling on you to use them. I fancy a good bluff, backed up by a pair of steady eyes will do the trick," said the superintendent. "This isn't a case of running off nesters. We're not bothered with them. We've got a nice bit of pasture at the far end of the ranch, at the opening of Smooth Creek Cañon. There are a couple of chaps with a bunch of horses—I fancy the brands are pretty well mixed — and they've got a loose idea about fences.

"I need every spear of that pasture for fattening. Range is getting pretty well burned off. The boys have run them off a few times but it's too far away for them to watch regularly. There's a small cabin down there for you to make yourself comfortable in. Use your own judgment. I don't want any shooting if you can avoid it, but I want the pasture. What do you say, Bourke? It's fifty a month."

"Sounds interestin'."

"And a bonus if you'll stay six months. I'd like to have you. The boys say you're hard to keep, Bourke."

"Reckon I was bo'n with the saddle-itch," admitted Sandy. "But Texas is shore home to me. I'll likely stick."

"My foreman gets married in the Spring. Going to raise alfalfa. If you and I get along together we may have another talk about that time."

"Put me on the books," said Sandy.

"Good."

The two men shook hands appreciatively.

"Your chums are bunking with another chap in a separate cabin. They've got room for you overnight, and when you come in to the ranch-house the cook'll outfit you with grub. Better report every week. Come in Saturday nights until you persuade them to leave the pasture clear. Come in!"

The door opened and two men entered, their spurs jingling on the floor.

Sandy swung on his heel to meet them, slapping them effusively on the back.

"You ornery, bow-windowed, wife-beatin' ol' Pi-u-te!" he exclaimed, smiting a stout, sun-rouged cowman, too stout for saddle ease, bow-legged, high-stomached and bald, who pushed him away rapturously with short jabs into the arms of his husky, square-set companion, whose drooping mustache, like the down-turned horns of a Texas steer, failed to cover his welcome grin. To him Sandy turned his welcome. "An' you, you ol' timber-wolf, what's the price of sody-water. Stop millin' me. I'll stampede."

Superintendent Barton surveyed the boisterous trio and turned to his desk contentedly. Sandy Bourke was a valuable addition to the outfit upon whose efficiency he prided himself.

"Come to chuck, you spotted ol' son of a gun," squeaked the stout man in a high pipe strangely at variance with his build. "Come to chuck an' meet up with the boys. Yo're leaner'n a cactus-fed coyote. Livin' is high on the Curly O. Sage honey and deer meat for supper tonight. Tune up, Sammy."

The square-set man obediently produced a harmonica as they left the office, and, cuddling it beneath the lambrequin of his black mustache, breathed out melodiously a lilting march as the three marched toward their quarters where a dozen cowboys, their day's work ended, waved their hats in greeting.

The back door of the office opened, and Barbara's dimpling face appeared.

"Did you get him, dad?" she asked.

"Signed up, honeybunch. There go your 'Three Musketeers' now. I'm going to send him to Smooth Creek Cañon at sun-up."

"Then I must get him the book I promised him. Look at them, dad."

The two stood by the window, watching

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Mormon Joe introducing the newcomer with elaborate gestures, while Soda-water Sam, astride the corral fence, militantly sounded his harmonica.

Behold El Capitan!
Look at his independent air,
Notice his misanthropic stare,
And match him if you can—
He is the champion beyond compare.

IT WAS the fourth day of Sandy's vigil in the Smooth Creek pastures. At morning, noon and night he patrolled the meadows, set with great alama trees, thicketed with lower growths, the creek flowing clear and cold from the upper cañon. So far he had found no sign of invading hoofs.

For a while he was inclined to think the job one manufactured as a reward for his interference in Barbara Barton's behalf, but further meditation dispelled the idea and its accompanying resentment. Sandy knew his own value on a cattle-ranch, though his self-conceit as to purely personal attraction, especially regarding the fair sex, was practically nil.

He sat outside the cabin, snug in a shady hollow close to the water, devouring the last pages of "The Three Musketeers." The ashes of his midday fire sent up a last lazy thread of blue, his dishes, fresh-scoured in the creek, reflected the dabs of sunlight that filtered through the leaves. Pete, saddle-free and unhaltered, nipped the crisp, green blades contentedly, twenty yards away, lifting his head now and then to exchange looks with his master, nickering for attention when Sandy failed to raise his head from the book.

At last he closed it, rolled the inevitable cigarette, folded his arms beneath his head and lay at full length, looking up at a woodpecker, querulous at the tobacco smoke, yet loath to leave his well-lardered bough.

"That is sure some book, bird," said Sandy. "Search me though why they don't call it The Four Musketeers. That *Dartagnan* chap was the pick of the herd, to my mind. Hullo!"

He rose to a sitting posture, listening to the sound of hoofs dull on the sod. Pete's ears were pricked forward as he came in to his master's trilling whistle. The woodpecker flew away as the cowboy rose, his lean body bent at the hips, ready hands hovering above the holsters he had thrust forward on his hips.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Bourke," cried a merry voice. "I'll come down."

Barbara Barton cantered up to the cabin, her hands held above her head in mock surrender, the reins about her saddle-horn, her pony whinnying at Pete, standing by his master's side.

"Did you think I was a horse rustler?" she asked, dropping lightly from the saddle, trim in riding-skirts and tan boots. "I've brought you news of them. Dan Deering, he's our foreman, you know, saw them in Rubio yesterday trying to sell some stock. That means no work for you for a few days. Dan says they won't come in till they've spent all they get for the horses. Have you had lunch?"

Sandy nodded.

"All fed an' washed up. But I can blow up the fire if you want some coffee."

"Thank you. It's too bad you've eaten, I brought enough for two. And pie! You can eat a piece of pie, can't you?"

She loosened the girth of her pony and took off the saddle, waving aside Sandy's offer of assistance.

"Saddle your pony, groom and feed him,
Then perhaps you'll learn to lead him,"

she chanted. "That's dad's orders. I'll turn him loose to make friends with Pete while we eat. Oof, oof! I'm as hungry as a wolf."

BEFORE he realized it, Sandy found himself seated cross-legged on the turf, opening sardines and talking easily with one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen.

"I often come down here," chatted Barbara, eating with a frank appetite. "It's the coolest place on the ranch. The cabin was built by Quimby when he first located here. We used to camp here often Summers when mother was alive. Just the three of us. There's a big pool down a ways where we went swimming. Find it?"

"M-mm!" replied Sandy, surprised, with a mouth full of sardine sandwich.

"Dad set up the diving-board. It used to be heaps of fun. I can't get dad down here any more, so I'm making a sketch of the pool for his birthday as a surprise."

She touched a canvas satchel tied to the cantle of her saddle. Do you draw, Mr. Bourke?"

"Cards," answered Sandy laconically.

"Do you gamble?" she asked, her eyes

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assuming the round-orbed seriousness that the most unsophisticated of maidens can produce instinctively.

Sandy's own eyes twinkled.

"Some," he said. "Jes' natchelly hev' to hev' some excitement. Breaks out spasmodic, like measles, an' gen'ally breaks me."

"Why don't you save your money?"

"I do—when Pete needs a new saddle or my Sunday clothes get careworn."

"Aren't you going to have a ranch of your own, some day?"

"I shore wish you'd answer me thet question, miss. I'm the original human wanderbug. Ever see them bugs skitterin' about the top of a pond? Thet's me. I come by the rovin' heel legitimate. Dad come to Texas, way off in Palo Pinto County, on the Brazos, from No'th Ca'lina in the seventies. He was a 'Ku Klux' leader an' they asked him to travel. He married a gel from home, later, an' the two of 'em, after I come along, wandered plumb over the whole western states. They're dead now, an' Pete an' me keep house where I hang his saddle. Never had what you'd call a home. Dad was always settlin' an' never settled, an' me, goin' along with 'em, got the habit bad, same as thet *Dartagnan* chap in the book."

"Did you finish it?"

"I shore did, an' much obliged to you. Wish I'd lived in those days. I'd like to have had my guns along, though. Them stickpins they packed didn't amount to much when they had the odds against 'em."

"I brought you the sequel. 'Twenty Years After.'"

"Thet's bully. Any of 'em settled down by then?"

"*Porthos* tried. But it didn't last."

"I reckon all of 'em hed too much fun driftin'."

"I suppose so. Don't you like your pie? I cooked it myself."

Sandy flushed.

"I was savin' half of it for Pete," he said. "Hope you don't object, but he's plumb crazy over pie."

"Of course I don't mind. Let me feed him."

Pete, snuffing gently at the girl's hand, daintily ate the juicy slice of blackberry pie, nosing delicately at the crumbs in Barbara's palm, and holding up a forefoot for a shake of gratitude.

"Isn't he a darling?" she said. "Craps won't do that."

"Craps?"

"Dad called him that when he was breaking him for me, because he was always throwing himself."

They both laughed. Craps looked around suspiciously and went on eating.

"I'll hev to make my rounds," said Sandy rising. "Got to earn my money."

"Wait just a minute. We haven't finished the pie. No more? Then I'll leave it for you and Pete. Dad's birthday is Friday. We'll hold it Sunday. We always make real holidays out of birthdays on the Curly O. We have special things to eat, and sports in the afternoon, and, after supper, there's a big fire in the corral and we all sit on the fence and look on at stunts. Sam plays his harmonica and some of the boys sing. What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm a dummy a' that sort of thing."

"You must do something."

"I might do some fancy shootin'."

"Goody. You can do that in the afternoon. Do some now. Craps won't mind. I suppose Pete won't."

"The ol' pie-eater thinks powder's perfume," said Sandy, picking up the sardine-tin. "Will you throw this up, miss? Fairly high."

"All right. Say when?"

"Go ahead!"

"I was waiting for you to get your guns ready."

"They'll be there."

The girl tossed the tin into the air. Sandy's hands moved too swiftly for her eyes to follow, but there was a glint of dull metal and six shots barked in rapid succession. The can, about to descend, jumped twistingly at each explosion, dropping to the turf punctured in half a dozen places in box and lid.

"Dandy!" cried Barbara. "I wish I could do that."

"Got to go now," said Sandy, carefully swabbing out his barrels and refilling his cylinders from his belt.

"Do you remember the picture-show?" asked the girl, rubbing Pete's soft, appreciative nose while Sandy adjusted the saddle.

"Sure thing."

"Remember the winner of the roping and tieing—John Redding?"

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"M-mm!"

"Do you know him?"

"No, but I'd shore like to meet up with him, though. He's some hasty kid."

"We saw him at Cheyenne. Miss Ashton and myself. He's her cousin. They gave the time there as forty-eight and a half."

"Forty-nine's good enough to hold most of 'em. I've done it in fifty-three myself, an' Pete an' me shore had to hustle."

"Do you—think—he's good-looking?"

Sandy looked at the girl, who was intent upon scratching Pete between the eyes. His eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Best-lookin' youngster I've seen in ten years," he answered promptly. "Bet he's clean cut all through."

"I think so," said Barbara and blushed; but only Pete saw it.

"I'll have to start my picture," she said. "I'll saddle up. Good-by, if I don't see you again before Sunday. Perhaps I'll come over again before then if I don't finish the sketch today."

"Betteh keep away till I've persuaded those gents where the fence runs," said Sandy, swinging up on Pete who tried to bite his foot in play.

"They won't hurt me. I've got to get the drawing done by Sunday. Good-by!"

"Good-by!" Sandy pressed his knees into Pete and loped up the creek.

"Pete," he said, "I allus suspected them freckles of mine had worked through to my fool brain. There was me, swappin' talk with thet li'l gel like I'd knowed her all my life, an' thinkin', like a swelled-up lunkhead, she'd rode over to see my sandy-topped carcass. Here's wishin' John Redding all the luck in the worl'. He's got to be some man to get her. Get along, li'l hawss!"

TWO more days passed uneventfully and Saturday came without Barbara's reappearance. Sandy, oiling his guns inside the cabin, began to pine for more intimate excitements than the second-hand adventures of "Twenty Years After" and the playing of Canfield solitaire. In the week he had beaten his imaginary banker to the tune of eight hundred and ninety-seven dollars and the useless luck palled on him.

"Thet's the way it goes," he said, glancing out of the open door at Pete who was standing at gaze by the creek. "First real game I get into I'll hold bobtails an' one-end straights all evenin'."

A sudden wind ruffled the leaves of his book lying by his outdoor fireplace.

"Mustn't spoil Miss Barba'a's book," he muttered, and stepped out to rescue it.

Pete snorted and wheeled as two men rode swiftly around the side of the cabin. They were rough-looking customers, heavily bearded, wearing chaparajos and tapideros that showed hard work among the cactus. One covered Sandy with his revolvers, the other held a Winchester across the pommel of his saddle, ready for action.

Sandy restrained with an effort the instinctive flash of his hands to his hips, remembering the revolvers that lay with his belt and empty holsters in the cabin. He held his arms high above his head at the gruff command of the man with the rifle who surveyed him sneeringly.

"Caught yer nappin'? Jim, keep him stretchin' while I collect his artillery. In the cabin likely."

He dismounted and entered the cabin, reappearing with the guns. Sandy followed him with cold eyes, the pupils concentrated to black dots that held tiny red sparks like the fire-beads on a burnt stick.

"Nice little hawss you got there," said the man, buckling on Sandy's belt above his own. "Think we'll add him to the string, eh Jim?"

Sandy whistled shrilly, twice between his teeth. Pete whirled on his haunches, and, at a second command, tossed his head and raced away into the bushes.

"Trick hawss, eh? Thet's the last trick you'll play on us," said the man with the rifle, sending a vindictive but useless bullet after the galloping Pete. "We'll get your circus pony after we get through with you. You can put your hooks down, Mister Two-Gun man. You're harmless."

"I never aimed to do any," said Sandy dolefully. "What's the idea of all this rough stuff?"

"Crowin' soft now your comb's cut? Ef you'd showed fight I'd 'a' shot the tongue out of yer mouth. As it is, I'll use it."

"We heerd Mister Barton hired a watch-dog," he went on sneeringly, "on'y we didn't know it was a cur. Put up your face when I'm talkin' to yer!"

Sandy raised his dejected head. The sparkle had gone from his eyes which opened pleadingly.

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"I ain't aimed to do you fellows any harm," he said. "A chap has to take a job when he needs one bad, don't he?"

"A coyote 'thout enny more spunk 'n you've got's likely to be out of a job most of the time. Listen! You go back to your boss—ef you ain't got the pluck to face him ye'd better find it—an' tell him from me, from Plug Selby an' his side-kick, Jimmy Burroughs, thet the grass is sweet in Smooth Crick Cañon an' we aim ter use as much of it as we want ter."

The pupils of Sandy's eyes had shrunk again at the mention of the names, but he stood meekly with his thumbs tucked into the strap of his chaparajos, the picture of cowed manhood.

"An' tell him he needn't ter send enny more watchdogs to tag us. 'Cause if he happened to send one that warn't yaller, an' barked, I'd muzzle him. Do ye sabe? Now git!"

"Can I fetch my hat?" asked Sandy. "I wasn't aimin' to interfere none. The boss didn't tell me this was a shootin' job."

"Yer one of these picter cowpunches? Kinder gun-shy. You leave guns to a man who'll use 'em. Ef you bin wearin' your'n I might hev thought you 'tended usin' them. No," he snarled, "you can't git yore hat nor yore saddle neither. You walk, pronto, an' git yore feet tender to match the rest of ye. Pah!—" he spat on the ground—"I hate a coward. Go out thet-a-way."

He pointed with his right hand to the bluff behind the cabin, then shrieked as a gun cracked and his knuckles spurted blood. His horse reared, the rifle fell to the ground as he tried to control the plunging animal with his unwounded hand. His companion who had put away his guns while he sat laughing at Sandy's discomfiture, drove in his spurs and rode furiously toward the cowboy who had swooped for the rifle and gained it with one hand, the other holding the smoking derringer which he had snatched from beneath the strap of his chaparajos.

Sandy fired again, and the horse of Burroughs smashed to the ground, shot through the brain, his rider falling with him, rolling half stunned on the ground. Sandy was over him in an instant, kicking swiftly and accurately at the base of his skull, still menacing the wounded desperado, cursing at the pain of his broken hand and his frightened horse. Burroughs lay twitching, senseless.

"Even curs bite, Selby," snapped Sandy, his eyes blazing like steel in sunlight. "Get off that hawss. You'll do the walkin' afteh all. I allus pack a third ace to draw to when I'm dealin' with crooks. Now stick up yore hands! Never mind the leak. It'll cool you off."

"I've heard of you, Plug Selby," he went on. The desperado, his face twisted with rage and pain, his right hand dripping blood, stood before him helplessly, his horse sniffing at its dead companion. "Can't place you right now, I'm a bit excited, *an' nervous*. Stan' still! If I figger it out I'll come an' git you."

He dropped the rifle behind him and deftly took both belts from Selby.

"I hate to use my feet," he said, "but w'en you mix up with bad men like you, you've got to kick, bite an' claw, if necessa'y. My orders is to chase you, not to bring you in. I reckon Barton wouldn't waste grub feedin' you. He's got too many *good* hawgs about the ranch. I'll collect yore partner's artillery an' you can pack him out of here on one hawss ef he don't come to. Ef yore stock's in the cañon, take it along with you, an' keep goin'. An' hurry, because I've got a book I'm readin' which is a heap betteh company than you are."

He stepped back, picked up the rifle, stripped the guns from Burroughs, who showed faint signs of returning consciousness, belted on his own guns and sat down on the sill of the cabin door, the rifle across his knees.

"Glad you brought the Winchester along," he said. "You keep straight down the medder an' don't turn aside long's you're in range. An' fix the fence after you. It'll save me trouble, later."

He whistled a trilling signal. There was an instant whinny and Pete trotted up to Sandy's side, where he stood, pawing, with little snorts at the dead horse.

The stunned rustler began to move, and sat up, holding his head in both hands.

"What the ——" he began dazedly.

Selby cut him short.

"Git up, you fool," he said. "Kin you walk?"

Burroughs got stiffly to his feet, swaying with dizziness.

"Head's busted in," he grunted.

"Then climb on the mare."

Selby roughly assisted him to the saddle

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and placed the reins in his groping hands, taking the bridle in his left hand.

"Take yore saddle," said Sandy. "I wouldn't give it hawss room."

"I'll git even with you fer this," said Selby savagely, picking up the heavy saddle with difficulty and jerking the bridle free from the stiffening horse.

"Game's open any time," answered Sandy cheerily. "Ef I wasn't in a hurry to get shet of you I'd make you bury the hawss. I'll do it myself, though it's more'n I would for either of you. I'd use you—'thout strychnine—to pizen coyotes."

Selby, wincing with the pain of his wounded hand, set the saddle in front of Burroughs, cursing him as he told him to steady it, and the two moved slowly down the open meadow, Sandy watching them, the rifle across his knees, until they disappeared in the trees, half a mile away.

"Thet was shore a close call, li'l hawss," he said to Pete, stroking his muzzle. "We'll get rid of thet pony—I'd ruther shot one of them anyday—an' then we'll see if they chopped off the head of that Miladi person in the book.

"We'll have news for the birthday pahty termorreh, ol' pie-eater," he said, as he came out from the cabin later with the book, and, turning the leaves, was transported from sunny Texas to sunny France in the first enthralling sentence from the king of romancists, Alexandre Dumas, *père*.

IT WAS four o'clock when Sandy made a final tour of the pasture, finding the tracks that showed where the rustlers had followed out his commands and rounded up their herd, driving them through the fence and replacing the torn-down wires. Sandy saw the horses grazing here and there on the spare herbage. He felt inclined to examine their brands, still puzzling over some vague idea that failed to link itself with any definite line of thought.

"I've heard those two beauties described somewheres," he said to Pete, "or read it—on a reward likely—but I can't place it. Some likely hawsses in thet bunch of theirs. Fifty-seven varieties of brands, at that. I reckon Selby an' his pal hev gone to town for medical advice for busted hands and sore heads. Both of 'em got sore heads, Pete. Chuckle, you ol' pie-eater, thet's a joke."

He rode back toward the cabin to collect his belongings before reporting the week's happenings at the ranch, crossing the creek at a ford below the swimming-pool that Barbara had sketched for her father.

"Lots of daylight, li'l hawss," he said. "Let's take a look at the place so's we-all can compliment her proper when we see the picter."

He cantered along the shady bank, rolling a cigarette. At the diving-board Pete suddenly shied.

"Hol' on there, doggone ye, I've spoiled my cigareet," said Sandy.

Pete stopped at the remonstrant tone, bending his head to sniff at a block of paper on the top leaf of which showed a spirited water-color of the pool.

"Hullo!" said Sandy. "She's forgot her sketch. Shucks! Thet's funny!"

He dismounted and picked up the block. Close by lay the canvas satchel, an upturned paint-box, the white color-pans scattered on the grass amid pencils and brushes. Sandy threw the lines over Pete's head and sought the turf for signs.

"She must hev come early this mornin' while I was up pasture," he said. "An' those skunks spotted her. An' I sent 'em right along this way. She'd not hear the crack from that derringer, way the wind was. Only one of 'em!" he exclaimed as he found the signs he was looking for. "One of 'em drove off the hawsses to fool me, an' the other grabbed her. An' they got two hours start. It's up to me."

His lips closed down ominously as he spun the cylinders of his guns.

"We'll take these along, Pete," he said, gathering up the sketch and the drawing materials, tying them, replaced in their canvas bag, to his saddle. "Ef they've harmed her enny, I'll do some drawin' myself, an' it'll be a finished picter when I'm through.

He scouted the bushes, following a line of heavy footprints in the turf. A branch was torn away as if in a desperate grasp. A fleck of blood showed on the glossy leaf.

"Selby," he muttered. "Wish I'd plugged the rotten head of him, sted of just his hand. Burroughs 'ud come back for him with another hawss. Betteh cast about a bit, Pete. Too many rocks here.

He mounted and circled the thickets growing amid the outcropping rocks.

"Here we are," he said, scrutinizing the marks, dark-rimmed by the setting sun.

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"Pete, ol' swiftfoot, we'll catch 'em. Got no time to lose though."

With jaws close set, his Stetson well down over his furrowed brows, Sandy followed the trail that led through the trees to the cañon cliffs where cactus and greasewood and chamiso supplanted the thickets, growing on rocky ledges where hoofprints showed few and far between. He skirted the cliff, keeping on clearer, softer ground, knowing the walls of the cañon insurmountable for the time, and, now that the direction was determined, sure of his quarry as long as no trail came out from the tangled chapparal.

The cañon ran due east and west, and the sinking sun sent a long purple shadow ahead of the man and horse, as if eager to speed the pursuit. Sandy made good speed time, his thoughts far ahead, gusts of red anger sweeping through him as he thought of the lengths to which such desperate outlaws might go in their desire to get even.

"Mebbe they'll jest hold her for ransom, Pete. Mebbe— Ef they've tangled two braids of her pretty hair—I'll shoot first, I reckon, an' ask her all about it afterwards."

The cañon walls grew closer. Smooth Creek belied its name, tumbling noisily over a rocky bed. A chapparal cock sped down the trail ahead of him. High up, a buzzard soared. Pete envied him his point of vantage.

"Give me a lead, ol' buzzard," he said, guiding Pete in the softest dirt to offset any betraying tinkle of spur on rock. "Give me a lead an' I'll likely provide supper for ye. Move on li'l hawss, it's shore gettin' dahk."

The crimson sun-stain was creeping up the cliffs, chased by the purple shadows. The old cattle-trail he had been following was invaded by cactus, casting distorted shadows that made the discovery of tracks momentarily more difficult. Sandy reined in, and Pete threw up his neck, snuffing with open nostrils.

"Scent 'em out, ol' hawss. I'm goin' up here a ways," said Sandy.

HE LEFT Pete and picked his way to a shallow box cañon up the sides of which he scrambled. As he reached the top, the dusk filled with a violet tide the narrow cañon he had left. Where he stood was still daylight, though one or two stars peeped palely in the zenith.

"No moon till about ten," he muttered.

Below, Pete whinnied softly. Sandy could barely make him out in the dusky flood as he stood with head outstretched, ears pricked forward.

"He's scented somethin'," said Sandy, climbing to the summit of a shelf of rim rock and gazing up the cañon.

On the opposite cliff, far away, a light flared like a sudden star amid the blackness of a cloak of pines, hung midway up the wall. It vanished. Sandy shifted his position and caught its glow, a steady spark of red flame.

He quickly clambered down to Pete, striding through the cactus regardless of the thorns that tore at shirt and arms and scored his leather chaparajos. Pete was pawing the ground and nickering softly.

"We got 'em, Pete," he said. "Yore nose an' my eyes. Get along, li'l hawss."

Beneath the pine-clad slope he halted, patted Pete, dismounted, lightly closed his hand over the sensitive nostrils, and whispered into one cocked ear.

"Keep quiet, ol' side-pardner. Crick's doin' its best to help but they might hear. I'll be back before long."

Masked by the roar of the torrent, he crept swiftly upward, skirting the trees until he caught sight of a shaft of light fingering its way between the pines. He slipped off his leather chaps, then his shoes, making his way silently as an Indian trailer over the dry needles and slippery cones, gliding from tree to tree, invisible in the shadows.

Behind a great pine he shrank close to the bark, listening. He had come to a little plateau, partially cleared. A fire leaped ruddily behind a fallen log, lighting up the stumps of felled trees, the front of a tumbledown cabin built close against a ledge of rock in the face of the cliff, touching the dark mouth of a miner's drift-tunnel. No figures were visible, but he could hear men's voices from the fire which had been built with the prostrate pine for a back-log.

He dropped to his hands and knees and writhed softly forward on his stomach. A holster caught in a fallen branch and he stopped before a twig could snap, quietly loosening his belt and easing out his guns. He was close to the log now, and stopped to catch his breath regularly.

"Ain't ye goin' to give the gel suthin' to eat?" asked the voice of Burroughs.

"Eat nothin'. I've got suthin' to say to her thet won't improve her appetite, soon's I'm through. Pass thet cup."

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Sandy inched closer, his body writhed upward like a snake until his eyes gazed above the log, his hands lifting slowly, the blued barrels of the Colts dull in the shadow.

The two men sat close to each other by the fire across from the log, intent upon the division of a flask of whisky in a tin cup. A blackened coffee-pot was on the coals and two greasy tin plates picked up the firelight. The muzzles of Sandy's Colts raised and came down softly on the mossy log.

"Don't move till I tell ye. Don't wink."

The quiet voice of Sandy, coming out of the darkness, seemed to paralyze the drinkers. They held themselves rigid, arms stiffened as they held the flask and cup, only their eyes moving, red in the firelight, as they fearfully focused on the barrels of the pistols and Sandy's eyes, clear in the upthrown glare. Not a finger twitched in the little tableau, frozen with sudden alarm.

"You Burroughs," said Sandy, not raising his voice, motionless himself. "You've got two hands. Unfasten yore belt. Don't stray from the buckle. Empty them guns on the ground. Kick 'em to one side, careful. Now, Selby, you turn roun'. Don't trouble to get up. Don't move nothin' but yore laigs."

The rustler twisted grotesquely about like a squatting toad in the ashes.

"Put yore hands behind you. Now, Burroughs, fasten him good with yore belt. Let me see the job. Turn 'roun' yoreself. Now keep still, both of you!"

He sidled over the log, strode through the fire, and, a barrel between the shoulder blades of each of them, marched them to where their horses stood by some saplings.

"Back up to thet tree, Burroughs," he ordered. "Fold yore arms 'roun' it backward. Fine! Don't you try to make no breaks, Selby."

He took the rope from one of the horses and deftly fastened Burroughs' wrists behind the tree, using the slack to make a snug turn about the trunk and the rustler's neck, leaving him helpless.

"Now, Selby, yo' turn."

The ruffian swore as Sandy unfastened the belt with one hand and snugly pinioned him to another tree, unheeding his wounded hand.

"You open thet foul mouth of yore's agen," he said, "an' I'll stuff yore hat in it. I meant to shoot you on gen'al principles an' I will yet ef you've harmed thet li'l lady, only I just remembered while I was crawlin' up the hill where I read the description of yore worthless hides. They's a reward posted in Las Cruces for a pair of hawss-thieves, one of 'em named Plug Selby. Five hundred dobies for information which I'll be collectin'—an' me wonderin' how I'd buy a birthday present for Misteh Barton 'thout drawin' ahead. Where's the gel. Tunnel or cabin?"

"Cabin," said Burroughs sullenly. "See here, cap——"

"Thet's the last word I want out of either of you. You can do all the talkin' you want between the time we leave an' when the boys come back for ye after moonrise."

He lit a pine-knot at the fire and entered the cabin. On the floor, sitting against the log wall, was Barbara Barton, her eyes brave in the torchlight, bound and gagged. Sandy cut the ropes and freed her, helping her to her feet.

"Did they hurt you any?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I heard you outside. Don't look and talk as if you were angry with me. I couldn't help it. You don't know how glad I am to see you."

Sandy laughed, his face slackening from its tightly drawn scowl.

"That's better," she said. "You looked as if you were going to eat me. Where are those brutes. How did you find me?"

"Pete an' me put our heads together. I've got the brutes chained up. Come on, Miss Barbara, we'd betteh be gettin' home."

"Dad'll be terribly upset. We're way in your debt again."

"Wal," grinned Sandy, "I've made five hundred dollars tonight. We'll call it even. Of cawse, ef I was John Redding——"

Barbara's face was as bright as the flame of the torch.

"Silly!" she said, and followed him out.

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The BAD SAMARITAN

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By Arthur D. Howden Smith

Author of "The Sinews of War," "The Man Who Could Not Die," etc.

"I SAY, less noise out there!" called the Consul.

The shuffling of many feet in the soft dust of the road beneath the window was stilled, and he bent his attention again to deciphering the code aerogram on the desk before him.

"'Pot-luck,'" he muttered to himself, one finger exploring along the line of p's in the code-book. "'Pot-luck?' Ah, 'inaccurate information.' Don't these navy fellows ever admit they're to blame? Hullo!"

The rasp of deep-sea voices had died down with the suppression of shuffling feet. Now they boomed forth again, and as the Consul raised himself in his chair to look out the window the rasp became a roar.

"I don't care what ye say!" bellowed a voice of man's-size proportions. "Ar-re ye goin' to let me in or— Get out o' ma way!"

The door to the Consul's inner office crashed open abruptly, revealing a momentary picture of a much-frightened colored man, caroming across the ante-room, and there entered six feet of massive humanity, arrayed in the wreck of what had once been a pair of white trousers, a ruined pea-jacket and a dilapidated blue cap, bearing the insignia of a master in the merchant marine. Behind him followed two similar apparitions. One was short and wiry, not more than an inch over five feet, and for clothing he wore a suit of dungarees, the grease-stains upon which had been patterned over by a design in salt water. The other was half a head taller than the first man, raw-boned and saturnine of aspect. He, too, wore an officer's cap, but the rest of his costume consisted of heavy sea-boots and slops. The three stood in a row, the short one in the middle, just inside the door, and glowered.

"Who—" began the Consul weakly, after he had regained his breath.

"Ar-re ye the Consul?" cut in the first big man—he of the master's cap.

Braithwaite—lord of the high justice, the middle and the low in all affairs of his Britannic Majesty's merchant marine, which came within the sphere of his post on the isolated islet of St. Saviour's—simply nodded his head.

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"Ma name's McConaughy—Miles McConaughy," returned the least of the two giants. "I am—I should say I wer-re—master o' the *William an' Mary* out o' Belfast, as tight a cargo steamer, Mister Consul, as ye ever saw in the Caribbean. Me an' ma crew have come a matter o' a hundred miles in the ship's boats. We wer'rre—" again the peculiar accent, a compromise between Scots burr and Irish brogue—"turned loose by a —— Dutch pirate that over-r-hauled ma ship and sunk her. An' I've come to find out what amends the English government can make for failure to protect a vessel that is after sailin' with a guarantee o' safety on the high seas. Eh? What will ye be doin' about it?"

Braithwaite threw up his hands helplessly.

"The *Unser Fritz* again!" he exclaimed.

"'Twas her-r," replied the giant menacingly. "An' I ask ye is it not a foul shame to the English Navy that a single German cruiser should do as she pleases between Cape Verde an' the Caribbean, destroyin' an' deemolishin' at will? I makes me glad I'm not an Englishman."

"Aren't you a subject of the King of England?" questioned Braithwaite, seeking the first loop-hole of escape that the other's tirade offered. But his question only made matters worse.

"What good would he do me? English? Me English?" The giant laughed harshly and turned to his companions. "Ay, but do ye hear the man? English? I tell ye the Lord's truth—I wouldn't have an Englishman on ma ship. A more wor-rr-thless, onaccountable— But what's the use? No, man, I'm not English, I thank the powers that be. An' if I were bor-rr-n English I'd get maself naturalized to a decent nationaleety."

"What are you then? Irish?"

The giant groaned, and even his hitherto silent companions chuckled appreciatively.

"If there's one thing I'd rather be less than English, its Irish!" he roared, at last. "The dishonorable, Popish blackguarrds! No, sir, I'm an Ulsterman—an' I wouldn't have an Irishman on ma ship, no more nor I would an Englishman. There's many a good vessel been lost by masterrs that knew no better nor that."

It dawned gradually upon Braithwaite that he had a character before him, and as the idea soaked into his brain the humor of the situation appealed to him.

"It's an unusual proposition, Captain," he answered cheerfully. "As I understand it, you are from Ireland, but not an Irishman, and while you have nothing to do with the King of England, you consider yourself a British subject. I'm afraid I was a little dense about it at the start, but I'm beginning to get the hang of your argument now."

"Ye show an increasin' amount o' apreehension," conceded Captain McConaughy suspiciously.

"Thanks. And you are appealing to his Britannic Majesty?"

"I'm appealin' to the British Empire!"

"Ah, yes. Quite so, quite so! But as I was saying, you are appealing to the—er—British Empire because your ship—the *William and Mary*, did you say—has been sunk by the *Unser Fritz*. Well, I'm sorry to have to admit it, Captain, but that's getting to be an old story."

"It's gettin' to be a sad story," interjected McConaughy. "Put the English in high place and do they ever fail to make a mess o' things? Why don't they let Scotchmen or Ulstermen or Welshmen run the Navy, like they do the Ar-rr-my? Eh, now? Ye'd have a Navy then, and wan poor will-o'-the-wisp of a German cruiser wouldn't be makin' a laughin'-shtock o' all your fleet."

"There's undeniably something in what you say, Captain," agreed Braithwaite. "I suppose these men with you belong to your crew. Are they—er, Ulstermen?"

"Mr. Grant, here," said McConaughy, indicating his companion-giant, "is ma firrst officer. He's Scotch, like the fo'c's'le hands. Mr. Apgar's Welsh—he's chief engineer."

"Are there more of you?"

"Several dozen, by an' large," returned McConaughy dryly. "The Germans spared the lives o' all o' us as bein' so many walkin' advertisements o' the English Navy's disgrace. They're long-headed brutes—I'll say that for 'em—though not much as marksmen. It took ten o' their shells to send the poor old *William* to the bottom."

"It fair makes me shudder ev'ry time I think o' the engines a-splinterin' up!" exclaimed Apgar, speaking for the first time.

He was a nervous bit of a man, with oily black hair, and eyes that looked as if they

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had just been weeping. His voice had the sing-song nasal rhythm of the camp-meeting preacher.

" 'Ow, my! Boilers an' furnaces, grites an' flues an' funnels, all pitchin' this w'y an' that! It was 'orrible—An' yet we were all spared by the favor o' Divine Providence."

"Ah, Evan, mon, but the furrst shell the hellhounds dinged into us explodit under the bridge," Grant reminded him ponderously. "Before they went for the engines there wasna a trace left o' the charrthoose."

"Must have been a bad business," commented the Consul sympathetically. "How did it happen?"

"I LEFT New Orr-r-leans seven days ago," answered McConaughy. "The Consul there told me he had worrd from New York the Atlantic was clear o' German cruisers. But no more nor a hundred miles no'east o' here this scoundrel fired on us. He had twice our speed. What could we do? When his boat's-crews boarded us they ordered us all over-side with barely enough water and bread to make St. Saviour's, and such clothes as they didn't want and we could get on our backs. It's an achievement, I say, the English Navy may well be proud o'.

"Anyhow, it meant three days in the open boats for us. Now, we're here—forty-odd o' us. What are ye goin' to do about it? We're half naked, starvin'. We've no money, no means o' livelihood, no friends. The long an' the short o' it is, Mr. Consul, we've got left only a burrnin' contempt for the English Navy an' a disposeetion for revenge on they Germans."

"We're all with you in that last sentiment, Captain," returned Braithwaite. "And we're doing the best we can. I've just received a wireless—" he touched the paper on his desk—"from Captain Hardress of the *Elk*, a 'third-rate' especially sent to this station to run down the *Unser Fritz*. Hardress seems to have been led off south on a false clue, and the Germans seized this opportunity to make the raid that caught you."

"That's consolin' information," was the sarcastic rejoinder of the master of the defunct *William and Mary*. "If this English officer ye speak o' hadn't been a trustin' Wully he'd have been where he should have been, an' ma ship would not have been sunk."

"It's quite natural for you to feel this way over the loss of your ship, Captain," said the Consul good-humoredly. "But I don't want you to get the impression that Government is callous to the hardships imposed upon you and hundreds of other seamen by the activities of this commerce-destroyer. We are bending every energy either to run him into some neutral port and force him to interne, or else bring him to action in the open sea. Sooner or later we must succeed."

"It'll be later, so far as I'm concerrned," retorted McConaughy dourly. "Now, what about ma men?"

"They shall be looked after until they get another chance to ship or an opportunity occurs to send them home—whichever they prefer. I'll give you a line to Portugese Joe, who runs the hotel down by the quay. You'll put up there. If he doesn't treat you right let me know. You and your officers, of course, will be free of my table whenever you care to come."

"That'll be most kind o' you, Mr. Consul, an' in the name o' the *William's* company I express our appreeciation." For the first time a note of cordiality crept into the seaman's voice. "Ye're lookin' to me more the shape o' a man than these Navy officers ye tell me about. An' I would not have ye take personal any o' the harrd things I've said in ma misery about the English. They're an oncommon rotten race in the aggregate, but I'll be after admittin' I've found indeeviduals—only now an' then, ye understan'; no very grreat number—that were consortable."

"I hope you find me an exception, Captain," answered Braithwaite soberly. "Lend me some of you time. There's very little to do in St. Saviour's. But for God's sake, keep your men out of mischief. It will take all your energy, I fancy."

"Don't be worryin'," replied McConaughy. "Mr. Grant an' maself are not without some triflin' influence among 'em."

"Not entirely," said Grant, with a solemn nod.

The three filed out of the door, and presently Braithwaite heard a series of rasping commands, and the slip-slop feet in the dust. From the window he watched the nondescript column defile along the main street of St. Saviour's down the hill toward

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the quay on the edge of the harbor where Portugese Joe maintained the only hotel on the island. Some of them were in jerseys, some in undershirts, a few had shoes, and all had at least the fragments of trousers.

As they caught their stride, voices began to chant a song. Braithwaite leaned a little farther from the window, hoping to pick up the refrain of some music-hall ditty a trifle newer than those Cavendish, the agent, played on his phonograph nights when thoughts turned to home. But there was surprise on his face as the Consul finally sought his desk. The crew of the *William and Mary* had been singing what sounded suspiciously like a hymn.

II

"WHAT'S the matter with your men, Captain?" demanded Braithwaite two days later on the occasion of their meeting in the narrow main street of St. Saviour's.

"The matter?" Captain McConaughy bridled like an indignant mother whose progeny have been assailed by an ignorant schoolmaster.

"Why, I haven't had a complaint," returned the Consul with a chuckle. "Can't understand it. No drunks, no island ladies kissed, no fruit stolen. They haven't even beaten up any of the Spiggoties. What's the matter with 'em? They're all well, aren't they?"

"Ay," said Captain McConaughy a trifle stiffly. "They're all well. Did ye think, now, Mr. Consul, I was turrnin' loose a flock o' hyenas on ye? I have discipline in ma crew, sir."

"But what do you do with them?"

Braithwaite's eyes, roving toward the sun-smitten, bare façade of Portugese Joe's, could not find a trace of the company of the *William and Mary*.

"They're up the hill yon," answered their skipper nonchalently. "Ye see, the Welsh in the 'black gang' are arguin' with Mr. Grant's Scotch on account o' this doctrine o' preedestination we Presbyterians hold by. They're a good lot o' men, Mr. Apgar's, good as ever I sailed with, but Methodists, ye understand, an' what ye might call talkative—oh, very. 'Tis a continual source o' dispute among 'em. There are fewer o' the Welsh, but they have more the gift o' tongues—in especial, Mr. Apgar, a grand talker, sir. Come an' hear him some time."

"I will," replied the Consul abstractedly. His attention had wandered to a dirty cargo-steamer, loaded under her Plimsoll marks, that was wallowing in between the towering headlands. The gaudy banner of Spain fluttered from her poop-rail, and a greasy trail of smoke hung over her wake.

"That's odd," he said. "We get very few craft of her stripe in here these days."

"Ah?" said McConaughy. "Now, I mind havin' seen that vessel at New Orrleans before we sailed. But if it's the same one, she was loadin' coal, an' she will be havin' no right to put in here."

The Spaniard heeled around as her anchor hit the harbor-bottom, and presented a full view of her rusty, salt-spattered hull and soiled white upper-works.

"'Tis she," affirmed McConaughy. "I'd remember her anywhere for the pig-dirrrtyness she seems so proud o'. That would be the *Samaritan* o' Cadiz."

"With coal, you say?" answered the Consul idly. "Probably for some island depot, eh? With business as bad as it is, a tramp like that fellow would snap up any cargo that offered. But excuse me, Captain, you were asking me to hear Mr. Apgar. I'll be glad to. Don't forget you are coming to eat with me whenever you feel like it."

"We'll be drroppin' in on ye maybe tomorrer," acknowledged McConaughy.

And with a nod he strolled on toward the water-front. McConaughy was a professional seaman, and he loved the sea and more especially ships, even filthy, pot-bellied Spanish cargo-boats, with all the vermin of all the ocean-seas roaming fo'c's'le, cabin and holds. In the mood which had overtaken him he was not inclined to be communicative. He wished to be alone and to ruminate over his woes.

That miserable-looking craft which had just come to anchor in the harbor below him was the first sizable vessel he had seen since the *William and Mary* rolled over for her final plunge, and inevitably there had arisen before his eyes the picture of the old *William*, threshing along at a good eleven knots, with the trades behind her and the wave-spray spuming up over the bridge-screens. It is not to his discredit that hard-fisted, harder-bitten Miles McConaughy gulped back something that rose in his throat.

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Anxious to avoid any further intercourse, he turned out of the main street and followed a narrow alley to one of the side streets that zigzagged down the hill towards the harbor, on a line more or less parallel with the broad, partially-shaded thoroughfare which was the principal artery of the sleepy little island town.

This side street was almost as narrow as the alley, and the huge palms and banana trees met overhead in a roof that shut out all but the most elusive sunbeams. There were very few people abroad in St. Saviour's at that hour of the day, verging on noon, and in the prevailing silence voices carried far.

Captain McConaughy was not an eavesdropper, but the few words he heard as he approached the corner where the alley and the side street met were calculated to remove any compunction he might otherwise have felt over the part he played. His feet made no noise in the soft coral-dust of the road, and he stopped just short of the corner in the shadow of a wall and a monstrous tropical bush.

"I don't like it," protested an incisive voice McConaughy recognized as that of Mawson, an American agent, with whom he had had several drinks at Portugese Joe's bar the day before. "Why don't you do it yourself, Meyer? It's your own dirty work, you know, and just because I've taken a hand for you this far doesn't mean——"

"Ah, but my dear friendt," remonstrated a Teutonic voice. "Haf I not toldt you it iss imbossible for me to risk everything by going on board myself? Yes, I know it iss much I ask of you, but my Government will not forget. There will be other commissions. And I can not do this myself. It iss easy to be seen. All you haf to do iss go on board at once, caution der cabtain not to bermit any intercourse with the shore and tell him to come to my house after dark. You haf also to guide him to my house this evening, because he iss a stranger and a Spaniard and vat you call a —— fool, eh? But that iss all, and it iss not much."

"It's easy enough for you to talk about," replied the American. "But if the English bunch here ever got onto this, it would be good-by to my success as a trader. I don't like it, I tell you, Meyer; but I suppose I must see you through so long as I have gone this far."

"That iss the right sbirit," exclaimed the German accent. "If you——"

They moved away and the next few words escaped McConaughy, but he stole up to the corner in time to see a large stout man turn in at the gate of a house with the German Consular shield over the doorway. The thin, sparse figure of the American was hastening down the street in the direction of the quay. McConaughy followed him at a more moderate pace, fists clenched at his sides, his eyes blazing with satisfaction.

"After all, it's something to be master o' a prayin' ship," he muttered to himself with a grin of satisfaction, as he stood five minutes later at the quay edge and watched Mawson's progress toward the *Samaritan*. "Into our hands the Lord has deelivered 'em, into our hands an' no others. Now, how to keep the Nay men out o' this? They'll be like jackals to the slaughter, but if I know wee Jock Grant an' Evan Apgar, not to be mentionin' one Hech, it's what might fair be called the showerin' out o' all the silver linin's in the sky!"

There was nothing despondent about the manner of the *William and Mary's* skipper as he tramped along the quay-side to Portugese Joe's, there to encounter his trusty subordinates and their charges still controverting among themselves with meticulous precision the exact measure of reliance to be imposed upon Divine mercy. Thanks to the cast-off wardrobes of the small English colony on St. Saviour's, they made a better appearance than they did when they arrived.

But there was still a certain piquant incongruity of apparel which served to make the company a distinctive one. Here a six-foot Scotchman thrust his limbs through the white-duck pants of a slender Cockney clerk; opposite him sat a diminutive Welsh oiler wearing proudly over his dungarees the mournful memory of what had once been a frock coat, distinguished in the diplomatic service.

"Go on with your talk, men," said the captain briskly in his best quarterdeck manner, as the disputants started to scramble to their feet. "Mr. Grant an' Mr. Apgar, please—a word with you."

"Ay, ay, sir."

They answered readily enough, but to both the "old man's" tone came as a distinct surprise. They had not heard such a ring in his voice since the grinning sailors of

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the *Unser Fritz* bundled them out of their own ship, and they were made involuntary spectators of the German Navy's target-practise.

CAPTAIN McCONAUGHY led them around the harbor to a quiet corner just beyond the town limits, whence there was an uninterrupted vista of the anchorage. Then he dropped on the grass and signaled them to do likewise.

"I just said to maself I was glad to be master o' a prayin' ship," he began. "An' the impression is becomin' more firr-rmly fixed in ma belief with every moment that passes. Listen to this now."

And he told them briefly the conversation he had overheard between Meyer, the German Consul, and Mawson, the American.

"An' yon's the—" questioned Grant with a wave of his arm toward the squalid hull of the *Samaritan*.

"She's the *Samaritan* o' Cadiz," replied the skipper. "You remember her coalin' at New Orrleans? Do ye need to be told any more, man?"

Grant shook his head.

"So that's the gyme!" exclaimed Apgar excitedly. The little man jumped to his feet and stared thoughtfully at the uncouth, lubberly collier set in the midst of the blissful serenity of that harbor which is called one of the world's great natural wonders. "Now, I arsk ye, ain't that clever? That German hengineer, 'e must be a man with a rare love for 'is machines, a-thinkin' like that for to get 'em coal. An' tonight, sir, what about tonight?"

"I'd rather do it by maself, ye underr-rstan'," said McConaughy reluctantly. "But I must have witnesses to back up ma story to the Consul. It's a sore thing to admit, but we're powerrrless as babes without his help."

"Right," echoed Apgar. "Three 'eads is better'n one in this kind o' dodge. We slip into Meyer's shrubbery after dark, lie low under his window an' prig 'is whole lay soon's 'e begins to talk. Where's 'e at then, I should like to know?"

"You've got it, Evan," answered McConaughy.

"Ah tak' it, then, ye'll be haein' a plan ready, sir, for what comes after?" spoke up Grant.

"Just so. O' course, ye'll under-rr-stan', this is in no way what might be terrmed final or a har-red an' fast deetermination. But if 'tis as we think, why, then——"

When Captain McConaughy had concluded, his hearers were silent for a full minute. It was Apgar who spoke first.

"I alw'ys said ye 'ad a 'ead on yer shoulders, skipper," he remarked with more familiarity than he usually allowed himself. "But this—this—" he cast up his hands in despair—" this is more'n ord'nary brain work; this is inspirition. I'm sore tempted to believe it's an acknowledgment o' prayer. 'Vengeance is Mine,' the Book says, but the Lord tikes 'Is vengeance in many wiys. 'Umble instruements we may be, but speakin' for the engine-room I'll promise ye we'll be hefficient."

Big Jock Grant simply shook his head.

"Mon, mon," he purred in his rumbling voice. "Ah never thocht to see the Phillistine deelivered hand an' foot, an' by his ane tools. But, sir, if ye can keep the English out o' this——"

"Keep the English out!" roared McConaughy in a bellow that scared the gulls across the bay. "Do ye not give me credit for the possession o' the common sense ma mother-r weaned me on? For what else am I plannin'? Let an Englishman but get his nose into this affair an' we'll have all his blunderin' self-suffeeciency handicappin' the wor-rrk o' men who can be relied on. No Englishmen for me! Braithwaite I must tell, but he shall not know until I have his promise to help us."

The three sat silent for a space, the eyes of all fastened upon the unseemly hulk of the *Samaritan*.

"By the looks o' 'er, I should s'y 'er grates 'ud be full o' clinkers," commented Apgar, at last. "But I hexpect she'd do—wi' a little tinkerin', she might do."

"Did ye by any chance tak' note if this Meyer keepit a dog?" queried Grant with seeming irrelevance, as they rose to return to Portugese Joe's.

"If he does, the dog'll get five inches o' cold steel in his throat," said Captain McConaughy.

"Aweel, there's no sense o' gaun tae extremes," rejoined Grant. "If ye hae no objections, Apgar an' I might speer 'round aboot the Dutchman's hoose. There's nae sense in jumpin' i' the dark."

"Ye're a man o' caution," approved the skipper. "Do so, Mr. Grant."

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III

IT WAS a pot-black night. Braithwaite could make out only a group of shadows by the door.

"Who's there?" he called from the window.

"'Tis McConaughy," answered one of the shadows cautiously. "Let us in, sir."

Five minutes later, having relighted the lamp in his office, the British Consul stared across his desk at the same three men who had interrupted his labors a couple of days before. Of the group he, himself, was the only one who showed any traces of perturbation.

"Well, Captain, what's wrong?" he asked. "Some of your men in trouble after all?"

"Man, man, ye will take us for roysterrers!" exclaimed McConaughy gruffly. "'Tis no such thing brings me here at this hour. No, Mr. Consul, we have news o' the *Unser Fritz*."

Braithwaite leaped to his feet.

"The *Unser Fritz?* Where did you hear of her?"

"I'll tell ye that in the proper place, sir. Now, bide a moment. Before we go farrther, some things are to be under-rrstood."

"What are they?"

"Fir-r-rstly, I have ma own plan. Will ye help me put it through?"

Braithwaite considered.

"If it seems reasonable," he replied at length.

"That's suffeecient. Secondly, will ye keep the Navy men from gowpin' the job?"

"After their persistent efforts to hold me to blame for all their failures you can rely upon me to bilk them in any way that's legitimate," was the Consul's hearty response. "Now, man, for Heaven's sake, dig into your story."

"Here ye are. Mr. Grant, Mr. Apgar an' maself have just come from a comfortable nook under-r the Gerrman Consul's window. Do ye mind that smutty-lookin' Spanish tramp that steamed in this morr-rnin'?"

"The *Samaritan?*"

"Ay. She's carryin' the next month's coal supply for the *Unser Fritz*."

"But, Captain, she cleared for Cadiz," remonstrated Braithwaite. "I saw her papers myself. I make a point of investigating the arrival of every steamer carrying contraband. Those are my orders. She——"

"Are ye a child, sir?" returned McConaughy somewhat contemptuously. "In times like these do ye think its deeficult to find masters who will swear falsely to their manifests? There's many a cargo bein' cleared for one port or another that never reaches 'em. Yon Spanisher cleared for Cadiz never expectin' to get within two thousand miles o' his port."

"Where's the rendezvous? Did you hear?"

"Ay; twenty-six degrees north, thirty-two west."

Braithwaite swung around to peer at the chart of the Atlantic ocean that hung behind his desk.

"Why—why—" he stammered.

"Exactly," proceeded McConaughy calmly. "'Tis the Sargasso Sea, or thereabouts. An' what better place for a rendeyvoo could ye ask? There ain't a vessel goes within two hundred miles o' that point under any conditions. An' no English Navy officer would ever think o' cruisin' off the traffic lanes. Oh, the Dutchmen are canty! But they overr-reached 'emselves this time. The *Samaritan* sailed from New Orrleans under sealed orders to put in here, an' here she was to be given her final instructions. No risk o' a leak, ye see—or so 'twould seem. An' yet, in face o' such precautions, because o' 'em, ye might say, she falls into our hands."

"Into our hands? Humph, we haven't got her yet. Not by a jugful. "A mantle of gloom overspread Braithwaite's face. "All I can do under the circumstances, I'm afraid, is to notify the Colonial government, have her interned and send a radio to Harddres of the *Elk* to make the rendezvous on the chance of the *Unser Fritz* not hearing of the *Samaritan's* seizure."

Jock Grant and Evan Apgar, sitting just behind their chief, shifted uneasily in their chairs. Mr. Apgar, especially, was inclined toward nervousness. As a man possessed of the "gift o' tongues," he was strongly of the opinion that he could have told the story much better than the skipper. McConaughy silenced them, however, by a single savage frown which he turned upon the Consul without abating any of its ferocity.

"Did ye not say, in the firrst place, ye would help me put through ma own plan?"

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"Yes," assented Braithwaite weakly. "But——"

"There's no 'buts' to it, sir. Listen to me. The *Samaritan* sails at five o'clock tomorrer afternoon. She'll hug the island shore-line, steaming northeast until she reaches Cape Cormorant, when she swings to enter the Cayman Bight. That will not be until close onto one o'clock o' the next morrnin'. We've got until then. Now, where is the *Elk?* It goes contrar' to ma deesposition to make use in any way o' an Englishman, but there are times when indeevidual prejudice is not becomin'."

Under the spell of the masterful personality opposite him, Braithwaite groped among his papers until he produced a wireless message.

"This came yesterday," he said. "Hardress asked for information and said he was expecting to lie off Port Maurice, to the north of Cape Cormorant, all of tomorrow to take on fresh vegetables."

McConaughy permitted himself a faint exclamation of satisfaction.

"It could not be better," he declared. "Now, sir, here's ma plan. An' before I tell ye, let me point out that its success would be hopeless if once ye let the Navy interfere with it. Let me do it ma own way, with ma own men, an' I can't fail."

A QUARTER of an hour later the master of the late *William and Mary* sat back in his chair and regarded the Consul questioningly.

"You are right, Captain," admitted Braithwaite. "The Navy could never work this trick. And it has possibilities, fine possibilities. Personally, I think it's worth trying. It's a flat violation of international law, to be sure, but we could risk that. What Hardress would say to it I don't know, and of course he would have to be consulted. I'll see what I can do though. By the way, I suppose you are not after any notoriety in this?"

"What d'ye mean by that?" demanded McConaughy suspiciously.

"Oh, you wouldn't mind letting Hardress take all the credit if it was successful; cable the Admiralty it was a trick he had planned and executed through private information he obtained? Something like that, you know. The begger'd probably get flag-rank for it."

"What do I care for such baubies?" McConaughy waxed indignant. "Man, tell the brass-buttoned donkey he can have all the credit he can lie himself into. I want none. Me an' ma men are after-rr the one end—the destruction o' that German hellcat."

"That being so, you stand a great deal more chance of getting Hardress's assent," Braithwaite informed him cheerfully. "I'll take care to point out to him the opportunities in your plan for himself, and if he's handled right, and you are careful not to hurt his feelings, I shouldn't be surprised if we win his cooperation."

"I'm in yer hands, then," said McConaughy. "What do we do firrst?"

"I'll send Hardress a code radio, notifying him we will meet him at Port Maurice tomorrow morning. We'd better ship your men over on the early narrow-gauge train —we can say that a ship is expected to take them home from there. Some of the Yankee fruit-boats that never come in here stop at Port Maurice. I'll attend to it."

Outside in the tropic night the three conspirators of the *William and Mary's* crew gripped hands silently.

"He's not a bad little man—yon," said the skipper, with a nod toward the Consulate where Braithwaite was hard at work over his code-book.

"Right-o!" assented Apgar. "'E 'as all the look o' a Tory, but broadminded, I should s'y. A little strong preachin' an' Lloyd-George would turn 'im to righteousness."

"Ah hae a sudden thocht," remarked Evan Grant, as they strolled toward Portugese Joe's. "Would ye say, skipper, we should let the English Navy captain tak the credit for the dog ah scragged i' the Dutchman's garden? He was one o' they Dutch dogs, an' measured by the yarrd he micht amount tae somethin'."

The three chuckled softly.

IV

IT WAS a perfect tropic night, despite the pitch blackness that had followed moonset, shutting from the helmsman's vision even the towering mass of Cape Cormorant that reared out of the ocean some two miles to port. The wavelets slapped gently against the rusty prow of the *Samaritan;* and the lookout on the

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fo'c's'le permitted his thoughts to wander to a certain café in Barcelona, where at this hour the guitars would be tinkling far more captivatingly than the anchor-chains under his feet.

On the bridge, the watch officer leaned on the rail and hummed softly to himself. Huge, unlovely though she was, the *Samaritan* lifted along over the motionless sea without visible effort.

Then, with the suddenness of a storm that swoops without warning, from the banks of darkness over the port bow came a loud hail—

"Ship ahoy!"

The lookout scrambled to his feet, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. The watch-officer was galvanized to action, peering fruitlessly into the void, one hand on the engine-room telegraph. Again came the hail, piercingly insistent.

"Ship ahoy!"

And there was added to it a strange jumble of words in which the startled listeners on the *Samaritan* caught distinctly several Spanish phrases of common usage on the Caribbean littoral, the inaptness of which to the present situation served all the more to stir their curiosity. The watch-officer pushed the speed-indicator around to "half-speed," then, as the bells jangled far down in the ship's bowels, thrust it all the way over to "stop."

The tramp shuddered throughout her length as the engines caught themselves up in mid-stroke, and there was a general opening and shutting of doors as officers off watch rushed from their cabins to learn the cause of such an unusual proceeding. They were just in time to hear the *chug-chugging* of a motor-engine in the darkness to port, and a request in English from under the quarter to drop a ladder.

Several seamen hastened to obey the request. Less than a minute afterward a wild-looking figure scaled the rail, cutlass in hand, and leveled a pistol at the Spaniards nearest to him.

"Ye're ma prisoner-rrs!" he roared with bull-like vehemence. "Stand ye're ground or I'll shoot ye!"

And as he stood there another figure, cutlass clasped between his teeth, piled over the side and stood beside him. And on the heels of that one came another, and still another, and then more, a steady stream of light-footed persons who held their arms ready for instant use and spread out in strategical formation around their scaling-point.

There were six of them on deck before a light broke upon the bewilderment of the *Samaritan's* captain.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he wailed. "They are pirates! Help, help, help! Juan—" this to his steward—"where is my pistol? Son of an infamous he-goat, what have you done with my pistol? Yes, yes, yes, the mother-of-pearl-handled one the directors gave me. At once, I say. Bring me my pistol! How shall I, without arms in my hands, defeat these perfidious robbers who assault us from the sea?"

Juan took himself off, but not to find the pistol. He was too wise, was Juan. In the light of a lantern which burned on the forward well-deck he had caught a glimpse of the grim faces of the pirates and he knew they were not men to be thwarted. Therefore Juan betook himself to a point he deemed farthest from the danger which impended.

But as he ran along the darkened deck, on his way to the paint-room under the poop, he heard the hiss of a heavy object through the air, halted in his tracks, and then, eyes distended, mouth agape, saw a peculiar, hook-shaped object circle an awning-stanchion and draw taut. Immediately he sensed the patter of feet braced against the steamer's iron skin, feet that ascended her side much as a fly ascends a mirror, and while Juan stood, anchored to the deck, the face of a pirate, hairy and ferocious, lifted over the railing and peered toward the shadows which concealed him.

With a cackle of fear, Juan fled forward. Better to die with his shipmates than alone.

In the meantime, under the bridge the leader of the first boarding party was shuffling order out of the confusion. Backed by a score of brawny-armed desperadoes, he had pushed the steamer's crew, men and officers alike, into the triangle of the bows where they cowered, panic-wilted, shivering before the bright cutlasses brandished liberally in their faces. Once the ranks of their captors opened, and for an hysterical moment they dreamed of liberty, but alas, the gaps were left only to permit the passage of certain scourings of the decks driven along before the onrush of the boarders who had scaled the *Samaritan's* stern.

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"NOW, then!" shouted the leader, who, it is scarcely necessary to say, was none other than the redoubtable McConaughy. "Mr. Apgar, will ye take a squad o' yer men an' clean up the engine-room? I misdoubt me there's some o' these vermin skulkin' down there still."

"Ay, ay, sir."

And Apgar led off a dozen oilers and stokers, stubby, powerful little men such as you see around the Welsh collieries.

"Is there one among ye speaks English?" demanded McConaughy next of his assembled prisoners—all confident the throat-cutting was about to begin.

Much whispering, side-stepping, denunciation *sotto voce*, remonstrance, the whole culminating in the expulsion from the close-joined, vibrant ranks of a young man who shakily admitted some scant acquaintance with the desired tongue.

"Ay?" returned McConaughy, after several painful rehearsals had convinced him of the prisoner's claim. "Well, man, I'll tell ye this—ye speak it none too well. I could wish—but no matter-rr. Hark to me! Tell yer frr-riends they are ma prrisonerrs. Have ye got that fast? Then listen to this. If ye all behave yerselves, if ye do what ye're told an' make no unpleasantness, ye'll be fed an' treated well. If ye don't—" McConaughy's voice boomed with threatening force—"overboard ye go, every man jack o' ye!"

Muttered ejaculations of fear and supplication from the prisoners, while the purport of this ultimatum was made clear to them.

"An' now who's yer captain?" demanded McConaughy.

Limp as a rag, his hair bristling with fright, the uniform into which he had tumbled from his bunk all creased and torn, the trembling captain of the *Samaritan* was belched forth from the ring of his crew, only too willing to sacrifice an erstwhile master in propitiation of the new. McConaughy surveyed him with the contemptuous pity which a big, strong man feels for a little, nervous one.

"I'm fair sorry for ye, ma frrr-rriend," he said not unkindly. "As one master to another-rr, I can appreeciate ye're sensations an' the discomforrt I'm compelled to put ye to. Ye'll be made no more uncomfortable than is necessary, an' I hope to be able to returrn ye're ship in good condeetion."

The Spaniard realized the friendliness of the speaker's voice and plucked up courage to return an answer through the interpreter.

"He say," repeated that worthy. "He arsk you mos' respectful 'oo you are; what you wan'?"

"Never mind who I am!" thundered McConaughy. "Ye have the face to ask me that? An' ye're hold loaded up with contrr-rband! Down to the fo'c's'le with the lot o' ye. Chase 'em down, men. Here, gently, there. Don't hit the poor babbies unless ye have to."

Flying squads of the *William and Mary's* men, who had been sent through the ship to round up any Spaniards in hiding, now began to put in an appearance, some with quarry, some empty-handed. A file of the "black gang" produced a handful of the *Samaritan's* engineers and stokers, who were shooed down the steep ladder into the fo'c's'le to join their shipmates.

Within fifteen minutes of McConaughy's first advent upon the scene, the transformation was completed. The *Samaritan's* proper crew were prisoners under guard, and the men of the *William and Mary* had taken their places.

"Ev'rythin' all ship-shape, sir," reported Grant.

"Have ye orrderred the boatswain to tow those boats asterrn? If they come to harr-rm that English Navy captain will be chargin' us with piracy an' deemolition o' his Majesty's property. Take heed o' that, Jock."

"They'll do," returned Grant succinctly. "Boatswain rove out a long cable an' they're safe frae the kick o' the screw in a sea light as yon. What now, sir?"

"Why, I'll see Apgar, an' we'll try an' get her under weigh. What d'ye think?"

"Ah'm all ready, if the engines'll turn," responded the first officer. "Shall ah tak' the bridge, sir?"

"Do so, Mr. Grant. What's that?"

The skipper inclined an ear toward an amidships grating.

"That, sir? 'Tis they Welsh. They're singin' a hymn."

"Ah. Well, I'm afraid ye'll have to pass the word along for no noise. There'll be suffeecient opportunity for thanksgivin' in the future. I'll tell Mr. Apgar, meself."

McConaughy found his chief engineer on a grating, perched amongst ponderous boilers and motionless pistons and cylinders,

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arrested in the midst of their stroke. Below him his men moved about like phantoms, oil-cans in hand, peering into odd cracks and crannies, testing valves, slamming fire-doors. And up from the pit of blackness, to the accompaniment of the escaping steam, their voices rose in the strains of "There is a Happy Land, Far, Far Away."

"There ye are, sir!" exclaimed Apgar, sighting his captain. "Come in. She's one mass o' flaked rust, but I 'ave 'opes, wot wi' a little oil an' much helbow-grease—not to speak o' prayin' in reason—we may get somethin' out o' 'er yet."

"Is the steam on?"

"Plenty."

"Very good. Start yer engines then. An' Mr. Apgar——"

"Sir?"

"Pass the worr-rd to the men there must be no more singin'. 'Tis a job that requires caution an' secreetiveness. There'll be time for rejoicin' an' givin' praise to the Lord in due course."

On the bridge Captain McConaughy found his first officer awaiting him.

"Hecht, man! But the boarrds feel good underrfoot after dirrty land!" exclaimed the skipper as he bounded up the bridge-ladder, never touching the hand-rail.

"Ay, sir."

"Give Mr. Apgar the worrd to go ahead. Are yer lookouts posted? We'll bear off to the so'-east two or three points. Navy men—an' more especially the English—Mr. Grant, are canty concerrnin' their appointments. We're due at Crawford Island by mid-afterrnoon. An' there was never a man yet said Miles McConaughy kept him waitin'."

V

IF YOU search all the maps published by all the learned geographical societies of Europe and America you will not find Crawford Island. That is not its name, and anyway, it is an unobtrusive spot of land on the edge of the Caribbean, quite uninhabited and only nominally in possession of the power which claims dominion over the nearest patch of volcanic rocks. Its one claim to distinction and favor—a claim known to few besides the British Navy and certain island pearlers—is a fine, deep-water harbor, landlocked and secure, which offers splendid opportunities of concealment.

Here, a few hours after her seizure at the hands of McConaughy's psalm-singing picaroons, the Spanish tramp *Samaritan* plunged her anchor onto the coral bottom and lay to, within a half mile of a somber craft, all funnels and bristling guns, H. M. S. *Elk*, third-rate, 23.5 knots an hour—which was a good knot an hour under what might be expected of the *Unser Fritz* in a stern chase.

From his bridge McConaughy had a clear view of the pompous discipline exacted by Captain Hardress, his more or less reluctant ally in this little excursion beyond the pales of international law. Marines strode up and down on sentry-go; there was a bustle of white uniforms here and there; a watch-officer paced the shining boards of the quarter-deck, telescope under arm, and on the high flying-bridge gold lace and epaulets glinted in the sunshine. The braying of a bugle was the last straw for McConaughy.

"Mr. Grant," he called to his second-in-command. "I'll trouble ye to take a crew an' returrn their boats to the English. Prresent ma compliments to the captain an' ask him does he not think it more in the manner o' common-sense to shut off buglin' an' drummin' an' such like nonsense? Does the dodderer contemplate firin' his batteries, I wonder? What next? A fool would know there are pearrlers all about these waters."

"Ay, sir," replied Grant. The first officer hesitated a moment. "D'ye see yon?" he went on, pointing over the *Samaritan's* quarter. "He's lowerin' a boat himself, an' bein' as we're strangers i' the parish——"

McConaughy nodded.

"Very well, Mr. Grant. I hadn't noticed. We'll wait for him then. Lower a gangway."

The English lieutenant who climbed the accommodation-ladder was young, pink-faced and most obtrusively haughty.

"Well, my man, where's the captain?" he hailed the first of Grant's fo'c's'le hands.

The Scotsman stolidly pointed toward the bridge, and the lieutenant betook himself thither, with a peevish demand as to "why the blighter hadn't known enough to receive a naval officer at the gangway?"

"Are you the captain?" the lieutenant challenged as he gained the bridge and found McConaughy facing him, arms folded across his barrel chest.

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"Yes."

The pink-faced lieutenant started to say something in an irritable tone, looked again at McConaughy and at the bulk of Jock Grant poised carelessly against the side of the chart-house, and thought better of it.

"Captain Hardress wishes you to come aboard the *Elk* with me," he said as sharply as he dared. "Are our boats in good condition?"

"Tell the captain I'll be over presently," answered McConaughy with a grin. "Yer boats? Man, did ye think we'd shock 'em under the screw? They're aft there; take a look at 'em yerself."

The lieutenant stuttered.

"Are you coming back with me?" he asked as soon as he had his breath.

"It depends on how long ye can wait," said McConaughy pleasantly. "I'm not wantin' to delay ye if there's any haste. But when ye do get back I wish ye'd tell yer captain not to be rousin' all the echoes on Crawford just because he's got a warship with him. Vessels have been known to pass close inshore here."

"But—but—Captain Hardress wishes to see you at once." The lieutenant's self-possession had vanished. His pink face had become crimson. "He also wishes you to warp over alongside the *Elk;* you can use the motor-dory and we will send our launch to assist. It is impossible for us to begin shifting the equipment for you until you are properly berthed. He wishes the whole job completed before dark, so that he can get out through the reefs without using his searchlights."

"Oh, he does, does he? Well, young man—" McConaughy's voice took on the booming quality that was known to his crew—"what d'ye take me for—a seaman or a landlubber? D'ye think I'd try to warp through a narrow harbor with another craft lyin' a collision-length away, an' no settled plan to go on? Tell yer captain he's lucky to have a sailor to deal with. As soon as ma ship is ready for the worrk I'll bring her over—an' not till then. Take yer boats with ye. I don't want 'em. I'll berth alongside ye with ma own steam, an' never scratch yer paint."

The lieutenant fled incontinently, and presently departed for his ship, towing behind him the boats McConaughy had borrowed from the *Elk* for the boarding of the *Samaritan*.

McConaughy followed the navy man's retreat with undisguised contempt, then turned his attention to the problem before him, which was to bring the tramp close enough to the man-o'-war to shift certain heavy articles from one to the other. He measured the distances with an accurate eye and finally sent for Apgar, to whom he explained the situation.

"'Tis what might fairly be called a deeficult manoover," he summed up. "But with a little prayin' an' some fine calculatin' I think we may give the English a set-back in their boastful pride."

"Right-o," assented Apgar cheerily. "I'll be on the levers, meself, sir. But a hymn would 'elp matters, sir, if I might suggest. The men are boilin' wi' energy an' testaments."

"Very good, Mr. Apgar. The men may sing one hymn while we are shiftin' poseetion, but when we are berthed there must be silence. This job is to be done without delay. I'll have no English Navy officer accusin' me o' delayin' the Empire's business."

Thirty minutes later there was a scurry and bustle on the decks of the *Elk*, as the big, bluff-bowed tramp sidled down on the cruiser, apparently drifting with the tide, the merest feather of smoke coming from her stacks.

"Hi, there!" yelled the blue-jackets on the third-rate's fo'c's'le-deck, dancing in their rage. "Wot d'ye think ye're gahn to bump into, ye bloody lubbers? Port yer 'elm, port yer 'elm! Back yer engines! Hi, yer dirty sons o' Satan——"

Officers on the bridge and quarter-deck shouted more dignified warnings. But the two big men who dominated the *Samaritan*—one from her bridge, and the other, and still bigger one, from the fo'c's'le bitts—merely nodded reassuringly. Captain Hardress, who was hastily summoned from the seclusion of his cabin where he had been enjoying his tea, while listening to a diluted version of McConaughy's message as delivered by his outraged subaltern, arrived in time to sense the real meaning of the affair.

"Quiet, there!" he ordered abruptly after one look at the approaching merchantman. "Pass the word forward for those men to stop making idiots of themselves. Can't you see he has her under control? The man may be a dashed impertinent fellow, but he's a seaman—I'll say that for him."

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McConaughy, heedless of the confusion he was creating, now crossed to the end of his bridge and surveyed the rapidly dwindling space between the *Samaritan* and the cruiser. Seemingly he was satisfied, for he shouted an order to Grant on the fo'c's'le, and one of the anchors roared down into the harbor depths.

A barely appreciable pause, while the *Samaritan* rode up to the anchor-chain, and McConaughy turned and waved his arm to a group of men aft. They released a reserve anchor over the stern, and within forty-five seconds the tramp was moored, hard and fast, so close to the gray steel hull of the cruiser that an ordinarily active man could have jumped from one to the other.

Then, and not till then, the whilom skipper of the *William and Mary* crossed to a position whence he could communicate with the little group of officers on the *Elk's* quarter-deck, prominent among whom stood Captain Hardress. McConaughy saluted with the quiet dignity that becomes one master in addressing another.

"I bid ye good day, sir," he said. "I'm here as agreed, an' ready to begin transshipment at yer pleasure."

Hardress nodded and issued the necessary orders. Presently the cruiser's huge crane whined and swung out an inquisitive arm above an empty hatch, dipped down, selected a long, mysterious something cased in canvas, and hoisted it gently through space, and down, far down into the gaping hold of the *Samaritan*, where it paused only at a deck just above the water-level. A few more bulky objects followed the first, and then the job was completed.

It was not yet dusk when the *Elk* hoisted her anchor and steamed out to sea between the harbor's palm-crowned headlands; and before darkness had blotted out the riding-lights of the cruiser in the distance, McConaughy followed her.

If a pearler had chanced to pass that way he would certainly have wondered at the great, slab-sided ship, with the streaks of dried salt on her hull, and the thunderous solemn chorus of voices that echoed from her ports, chanting "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow." In their own way the crew of the *William and Mary* held high revelry that night—to the horror and utter despair of the Spaniards who fought with the cockroaches in the darkened fo'c's'le.

VI

"THERE'S but one thing that worrits me," said Jock Grant.

Captain McConaughy leaned back from the mess-table and reached for a toothpick.

"What's that?" he answered. Then irrelevantly: "D'ye suppose, Jock, cookie will ever get the taste o' the garlic out o' his stew-pots? But ye were speakin'."

"Ay," returned Mr. Grant with the slowness which was his inevitable habit. "Ah dinna like this sailin' wi' false colors, so to speak."

"An' what might ye mean by that, Jock?" his skipper encouraged him. "There's such a thing as meelitary necesseety, ye know."

"Ah'm no complainin' o' the dirrty rag we're trailin' asterrn, skipper," declared the first officer. "But 'tis the name o' the craft. 'Tis fair hypocritical ye'll admit, an' gaun straight against the worrd o' Scripture."

Evan Apgar, fresh from his prolonged duties in the rickety engine-room, appeared in the doorway at this juncture and took his seat with a brief nod all around.

"Conteenue, Jock," urged McConaughy. "Ye've a point in mind, I see, but it fair escapes me."

"Ye're no verra glig i' the uptak', skipper," retorted Grant with a trace of asperity. "Ah'm seemply commentin' on the un-Scriptural use o' holy parable. The *Samaritan* brocht help an' succor, the Book tells us. An' here be us, callin' ourselves *Samaritan* an' carryin' death an' destruction. 'Tis un-Christian, contrar' to the speerit o' releegion. That's ma point."

"Well spoke, Jock," agreed Apgar, looking up from his stew. "I've 'ad the syme idea, but wi' that mass o' junk below-decks on me mind I never seemed to get the 'ang o' the matter. 'E've put it right, skipper. God-fearin' sailormen, wi' a knowledge o' the Scriptures, shouldn't be takein' liberties wi' Holy Writ. That's wot I s'y."

"Ma conviction is that the two o' ye have me gowped on the point," admitted McConaughy. "But what way would ye go to make a change for the better-rr?"

"'Tis no problem i' the higher theology," answered Grant. "The Samaritan i' the Book was a good Samaritan. Verra weel; this shall be the *Bad Samaritan*. Ah'm o' the opeenion she'll be unco harmfu' to

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a cerrtain party we all ken suffeeciently."

"Ye've said it, Jock," announced McConaughy. "She's the *Bad Samaritan* from this on. I'm for the bridge."

And he disappeared up the companionway that led forward to the chart-house.

For three days the *Samaritan* had been plowing her no'-easterly course toward that vaguely-defined mass of weed-strewn water which constitutes the Sargasso Sea, and the sun still shone brilliantly and the sea spread out around her almost as level as a dancing-floor, entirely deserted. For this was an empty triangle of the middle Atlantic, a wide area of tossing waves, lying between several of the traffic lanes followed by the commerce of the continents. No ship came here if she could help it, because to come meant abandoning the short courses that spell economy in coal-consumption and operating expenses.

Therefore McConaughy from his bridge stared out over an ocean that contained no trace of man. So it had been for two days. Before that there had been occasional trails of smoke on the horizon. But gradually they had become less frequent. Now stray patches of weed told him he was nearing the great belt of marine vegetation drawn together by the action of the Trades and the conflicting ocean currents, and this meant that the next plume of smoke would herald the *Unser Fritz*.

McConaughy glanced at the compass as he passed the wheel and then swept his decks with the comprehensive eye of a man who overlooks no details. Forward, two stalwart Scots, with cutlasses drawn, were guarding the open fo'c's'le hatch, whence came the babble of the Spanish prisoners who alternately fought among themselves until their guards went down and separated them or wept over the awful fate which they were assured awaited them at the caprice of the big man with the terrible voice who bellowed occasionally from the bridge.

Aft, some of Apgar's "black gang," off watch, were airing themselves by the rail. They had earned a rest, for under the skilful hand of their chief and a liberal application of oil, the disjointed engines of the Spaniard were grinding out a good knot and a half more than they had ever done since their builder's trials.

Otherwise, the *Samaritan's*—or rather, the *Bad Samaritan's*—decks were deserted. McConaughy reached for the binoculars in the rack under the chart-house windows and trained them on the horizon. From west to east he swung, steadily, inch by inch, scrutinizing the waste of waters with infinite pains.

He had almost given up the search, precisely as he had given up other similar searches, undertaken at intervals of an hour for the last day and a half, when a speck glanced for an instant in the lenses and disappeared. With an exclamation he worked back along the horizon's rim until he picked up the dot once more. Faint, scarcely distinguishable against the burnished reflector of the sky, it yet focused in his vision as a smoke-smudge pouring from the funnels of some vessel which had not yet come over the intervening curve in the vast swelling breast of the ocean.

The glasses fell to McConaughy's side, and the fingers of his free hand were knit together in a savage grip.

"Hecht!" he exclaimed. "'Tis she! It *must* be she!" He took off his cap. "Oh, Lord," he said slowly and reverently, "I thank Thee for that Thou hast delivered up ma enemy—an' Thine. Amen." He returned the cap to his head. "Quartermaster," he said briskly to the spare helmsman who was on duty. "Go below an' tell Mr. Grant I wish to see him. An' on yer way stop an' tell the guards at the fo'c's'le hatch to make it fast an' see that there are no ports open in the prisoner-rrs quarters."

When Grant arrived on deck, with Apgar at his heels, he found an orderly bustle under way. Squads of men were overhauling the davit-tackle for lowering the steamer's life-boats; the doors of the engine-room companionway were crammed with grimy faces, brought up from the nether regions of the stoke-hold by the magic word which had flashed from end to end of the ship. McConaughy himself was standing by a hatch, issuing orders to a gang of men working several decks lower down.

"Ay, she's in sight," he said. "We'll be up with her in two hours or less. Mr. Apgar, crack on yer steam. Get yer men to work instead o' lowpin' like silly crannies. Look sharp, all ye men! There's worrk to be done."

In less than twenty minutes the remorseless driving energy of McConaughy had effected all the necessary preparations. The fo'c's'le hatch had been effectually barricaded by heaping against it many lengths of

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chain-cable. The engines were turning over at top speed. Below-decks all was ready, and the men had been instructed to keep out of sight as much as possible. In fact, when McConaughy met his two principal assistants upon the bridge to point out to them the smoke-smudge on the horizon, now perceptible to the naked eye, the decks of the *Bad Samaritan* were as trim as those of a liner, a state of affairs which drew forth a disparaging remark from Apgar.

"Ye're too neat!" he expostulated. "W'y, skipper, the Dutchmen know they're goin' to meet a filthy Spanisher. Ye've 'ad a mania for cleanin' ship these larst two d'ys, an' now she looks out o' 'er part. Dress 'er down a little. Fly some wash in the riggin'. Muck up 'er decks out o' the galley."

"Ye're right, Evan," acknowledged McConaughy. "We can't afford to overlook trifles. Mr. Grant, take a squad o' men, rig out all the dirrty clothes ye can find an' tell Cookie to empty his garbage an' slush-tins on the deck. Ye might get up a can o' ashes, too, an' spread 'em 'round the ash-hoist."

WITHIN an hour the strange vessel was sufficiently close to make out her character. Long and fairly high out of the water, with rakish military masts and sullen turrets, she bespoke the man-o'-war, although she flew no flag. Smoke poured from her four funnels in a black cloud, and she carried an enormous bone in her teeth. She was fully two and a half times as fast as the lumbering collier.

"Quartermaster," ordered McConaughy, after a final inspection and a glance of approval at decks that would have riled his seaman's soul in a less hectic moment. "Break out the signal."

A quartermaster picked up a string of international code flags, which he hauled to the fore-peak and broke out. They spelled: "We are the *Samaritan*, for Cadiz, with coal. Who are you?" According to the instructions given to the Spanish captain, this should be followed by the cruiser firing a gun to starboard, if she were the *Unser Fritz*.

There was an anxious minute or two while the multi-colored signal-flags rippled out in the gentle breeze. Then a cloud of white smoke billowed up from the warship's farther side and the "smack" of a six-pounder smote their ear-drums.

"Yon's a sound I never believed would be welcome to me again," remarked McConaughy to his first officer.

"Ay," returned Grant imperturbably. "An' now will it be me ye'll hae below at the deil's worrk or yerself?"

McConaughy hesitated. It was palpable he was torn between two desires.

"It had best be ye, Jock," he said regretfully at last. "A masterr's place is on the bridge. But, man, I envy ye sore."

The two vessels drew rapidly together. McConaughy and the men on the bridge with him—all dressed in the slovenly fashion affected by the *Samaritan's* proper company—could descry the figures in neat white uniforms that swarmed on the cruiser's decks.

As they came within hailing distance an officer on the bridge of the *Unser Fritz* raised a megaphone and bellowed a question. McConaughy inclined his head and pretended he could not hear, then raised his own megaphone and shouted a string of gibberish which he intended to be unintelligible. He was slightly nonplussed, however, when the officer called back an answer in fluent Spanish.

"Hecht," he muttered to himself. "The hell-cats! There's no be-foolin' 'em for long. We'd best be quick."

He again went through the pantomime of a man whose hearing is not of the best and pretended to be busily occupied in conning his ship in such dangerous close quarters. The German officer who had addressed him before shrugged his shoulders and turned away. McConaughy almost grinned.

They drew closer still, McConaughy waving his arm reassuringly to the Germans. The cruiser was barely one hundred feet away from the tramp now. Every detail of her equipment showed; he could see the bulge of the light side-armor where it began just above the water-line, forming a protective belt about the engine-room. It was time.

HE LEANED over the bridge railing and made a gesture to a shabby seaman lounging by the combing of the forward-hatch. This man dropped nimbly through the grating and bellowed an order into the depths below.

McConaughy sauntered over to the side of the bridge closest to the cruiser, megaphone

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in hand, as if he contemplated another attempt to make himself understood. He heard the clang of a cargo-port opening, but he did not permit that to hurry his steps. He had a part to play; it was for him to keep the German's eyes well up from his water-line. And he played it.

With the megaphone raised to his lips, he stood in the position of a man about to speak, when it seemed as if all the rage of the elements had been let loose alongside the *Samaritan*. With a prolonged, crashing roar, as if a submarine volcano had burst, the *Unser Fritz* lifted clean out of the water amidships, buckling in two as she settled down, while a fountain of shattered and fused steel-deck fittings, guns, shields, funnels, fragments of masts and human débris was spewed over the waters.

The *Samaritan* was struck in several places by falling objects before McConaughy could signal his engine-room to back out of danger. And the rapid explosion of several magazines in the cruiser's hull created another tornado of devastation that pursued the tramp into the safety zone. But to do him justice, after his first thrill of exultation, McConaughy had but the one thought. Even as he pushed the engine-room telegraph indicator, his bull-voice roared out over the crackling of small-arms ammunition and exploding shells—

"Stand by to lower the boats!"

The *Unser Fritz* was settling rapidly. Her back had been broken, and already her main deck was within a couple of feet of the water. Such of her crew as had not been injured were scrambling about for pieces of wreckage, and many had taken to the water in order to get as far away as possible from the immense suction which would be created by her sinking hull.

McConaughy approached as close as he dared, then stopped and lowered his boats, six of them, at the same time ordering all the life-preservers cast overboard. He turned from the task of directing this work to find the cheerfully grinning face of Jock Grant towering over his shoulder.

"Aweel, sir," said Mr. Grant complacently. "Ah'm thinkin' ah'm nae sae puir a marrksman wi' they torpeders."

"Think shame o' yerself, Jock Grant," replied his captain sternly. "'Tis true we have taken our lawful vengeance, but those poor men are dyin' out there."

"Right-O," commented Evan Apgar, who popped up under Grant's mighty arm. "Ye might think, skipper, to 'ear Jock talk 'e'd done the 'ole thing hisself. 'Ow about the 'black gang,' Jock? Didn't we put yer alongside o' 'er so close a lad wi' a pop-gun couldn't a missed 'er—let alone a forty-knot W'ite'ead torpeder."

Grant shuffled his feet and looked shamefacedly from one to the other.

"Hoot," he said. "Ah'm nae sae muckle a selfish loon as ye'd mak' me oot. 'Tis nae mair nor the just pride a mon should tak' in a job weel done. But——"

With a last roar of bursting decks, the *Unser Fritz* rocketted and swayed, then plunged stern-foremost into the deeps.

"Ah'm nae the mon to stand by an' see puir deils gaein' to their dooms like yon," remarked Grant matter-of-factly, as he wrenched off his sea-boots and slipped out of his coat and trousers. "Stand by wi' a line to fling me, skipper."

And the giant went over-side in a soaring dive that carried him far out from the *Samaritan's* hull amongst the wreckage where wounded, drowning men were fighting for a hold on every match-box that drifted past.

"Ay," said McConaughy to his chief engineer, watching Grant strike out and clutch a German who had gone down twice, "'tis not so bad bein' master-rr o' a prayin' ship."

VII

TWO months later in the reading-room of the Young Men's Christian Association at Belfast, McConaughy came upon the following item in the *London Times:*

> Among the orders published today at the Admiralty is one conferring flag-rank upon Captain, the Hon. Richard Penworthy R. G. Hardress, of H. M. S. *Elk*, who trapped and sank the German commerce-destroyer *Unser Fritz*, after the latter had evaded for many months the vigilance of all our cruisers on the Atlantic station. Rear-Admiral Hardress will be gazetted to a fleet command at the earliest opportunity.
>
> It is a pleasure to see that their Lordships at the Admiralty are beginning to appreciate the importance of recognizing the merits of able young officers, regardless of the claims of their less vigorous seniors.

"Hecht!" said McConaughy, and his face split in a wide, soundless laugh. "Can ye beat the English?"

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The Rolling Stone Goes Moss-Gathering

By Ross Ellis

Author of "Just Nuts."

A HALF-BREED guide who had been sent back to the village for supplies brought the letter into camp. Jeff Stone ripped open the envelope carelessly, noting as he did so that it had originally been mailed to Thompson City, N. M., but that it had become well-nigh covered with forwarding addresses in following his erratic course across the continent. The letter bore a month-old date, and it read as follows:

MY DEAR NEPHEW:

By the time this meets your eye it is probable that I shall have passed into the Great Darkness—for I am by no means sure that you are still at the address I am using, and a malady like mine will not wait for mails to be forwarded. The doctor says I may last another month, but my guess is as good as his, and I doubt if another week will find me here.

Since the end of my life is most certainly at hand, I have decided to administer my own estate, thus avoiding both this new inheritance-tax and the possibility of a flock of legal harpies sharing in the fruits of my toil. While I have made a will covering the small residue of personal property that remains undistributed, there will not be enough to tempt the cupidity of any of the disappointed.

You are my namesake, though you have been little credit to the name, and to you I am giving my interest in the Millville Structural Steel Company. While not an actual voting majority, this will make you the largest individual stockholder. The stock, properly endorsed, is in a safety deposit box in the Millville National Bank, and I have left the key with James Burney, the cashier, subject to your call.

Some years ago, when my failing health made it necessary for me to shift some of my burdens to younger shoulders, I incorporated the company and gave Simeon Hanchett and David Hobbs each a thirty per cent. interest. They had grown up with the business and I thought they could be trusted to run it. Hanchett I made General Manager and Hobbs Secretary-Treasurer, while I retained the Presidency. Eventually I expected to divide the remainder of my stock between them.

In many ways Simeon and David have disappointed me. Their methods are not my methods, and I am no longer content that at my death the company should pass into their undisputed control. For several years I have drifted with the current, countenancing practises of which I heartily disapprove, merely because I have been too old and tired to protest. Of late I have thought frequently of you, my nephew. Perhaps you can take up the oars and bring the boat back on its course. At least it will be a diverting experiment—one whose progress I shall watch with interest if vision be granted me after the closing of my mortal eyes.

I am frank to say that your manner of life up to date has not inclined me to confidence in you. You have been a wanderer and a waster—a veritable rolling stone. Yet it may be this new responsibility will bring to light qualities which you have hitherto successfully concealed. Such is my earnest hope. I am leaving you a man-size job. Are you man enough to handle it?

Your uncle,

JEFFERSON STONE.

Young Stone was far up in the Maine woods when the letter reached him. Three months before he had been loafing on the ranch of a friend in New Mexico. Blessed

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with a big, strong body, simple tastes and a passion for the open, the world had been for him merely a wide playground. The period of "looking around" which he had allowed himself on leaving college had been extended indefinitely. Several thousand dollars still remained of his modest patrimony. When that was gone he vaguely expected to go to work. While it lasted his plans were as variable and free from purpose as those of the wind-blown thistledown.

But this letter aroused disquieting thoughts. For the first time in his rollicking life Jeff saw himself as he must appear to the eyes of the world's workers. He was twenty-five years old, four years out of college, and he reflected with a feeling of shame that thus far he had been about as useless a member of society as the country contained. An hour later, with an unwontedly serious expression on his bronzed young face, he was on his way back to civilization.

A telegram dispatched from the first railroad station brought back word that the elder Stone had died three days after the letter had been written. His body had been shipped East for interment in the cemetery of the Massachusetts village where Jeff himself had been born.

Jeff could pretend to little grief for the grim old man whom he had not seen since boyhood and whose sudden interest in himself was so difficult to understand; but his sense of responsibility deepened. His playtime was over now. The business was one of considerable magnitude, employing many men and operating over a wide field. That much he knew. It was a worthy inheritance. He would be worthy of it. He would prove that his uncle had made no mistake in choosing him as his successor.

He was an idler no longer, nor had he abandoned the open road merely to become a cog in a machine. He would step at once to the head of a mighty enterprise, just as a prince might have been summoned to rule a nation. The romantic features of the case appealed to Jeff. During the long journey to the flourishing Middle Western city of Millville, the Rolling Stone dreamed dreams.

FOUR days later, he strode into the office of the Millville Structural Steel Company with the air of a young king entering his kingdom. He pushed open the railing gate which guarded the outer office from unwelcome guests and walked over to the side of the competent-looking young woman who sat before the telephone switchboard.

"Is Mr. Hanchett in—or Mr. Hobbs?" he inquired briskly. She appeared to hesitate, so he added explanatorily, "I'm Mr. Stone, the new president of the company."

There seemed to be a trace of amusement in the appraising glance she turned on the broad-shouldered young man with the confident manner.

"Why, I hadn't heard—" she began. Then she smiled. "Yes, Mr. Hanchett and Mr. Hobbs are both in the private office. I'll tell them you're here."

"Never mind," he said easily, advancing toward the door which her eyes had indicated. "I'll just step in and surprise them."

Shortly thereafter he sat on a softly padded leather chair in the private office and watched his dream world disintegrate before his perplexed blue eyes. It was quite evident that the throne he had supposed would be waiting for him was already occupied. Here were no faithful ministers, eager to invest him with the robes of office, but two shrewd-eyed, self-assured individuals, in whose manner toward himself Jeff thought he could detect a thinly veiled antagonism.

"Of course, Mr. Stone, we intend to be fair," said Simeon Hanchett smoothly.

He was a mountain of a man, about forty years old, with huge, tight-skinned hands, and a broad, heavy face, as expressionless as a mask.

"But not—foolish," quickly qualified little David Hobbs, who crouched like a spider behind the big mahogany table and chewed at the overhanging ends of his fringe of sandy mustache.

Stone did his best to conceal the feeling of utter helplessness and bewilderment that possessed him. He had expected by this time to be seated in the chair of authority, with the others obsequiously explaining the details of the business to him.

"I don't know what you are driving at," he challenged. "Uncle was this company's president. He left his interest to me, and I supposed the presidency went with it. He certainly expected me to succeed him, and I——"

"Your uncle's interest," Hobbs cut in, "amounted at the time of his death to only

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forty per cent. of the capital stock. Together, Mr. Hanchett and I hold sixty per cent. During the President's lifetime our stock was tied up with his in a voting agreement which he controlled; but that's no good now. Hanchett and I hold the whip hand."

There was a jubilant note in the little man's voice. Stone swallowed hard. He looked at the General Manager.

"Do you mean that I'm to be—squeezed out?"

Simeon Hanchett slowly nodded his big head.

"Probably it will look that way to you. As Mr. Hobbs says, we can't afford to be foolish. Of course we are grateful to your uncle; but he was an old man and in his later years had a good many odd notions. We can't be guided by them. If you have been entertaining any hopes of an official position here, the sooner you dismiss them the sooner we shall arrive at a basis on which we can do something for you."

When Jeff had dismissed his hopes—the process, though painful, was very short—they seemed, on retrospection, to have been rather preposterous. Beyond the theoretical knowledge gained in his engineering course at college, what qualification had he for the conduct of an enterprise such as this? He could see how ridiculous his claim must appear to these older men who knew the business from A to Z. Naturally they would not entrust the reins of government to him until he had proven his worth.

"All right," he said with a fair degree of cheerfulness, "I guess I had better learn to handle a musket before asking for a marshal's baton. Put me to work somewhere, as near the bottom as you like, and I'll be satisfied for the present. Later, after I——"

Hanchett raised a plump hand.

"I may as well tell you now, Mr. Stone, that we can not use you here in any position."

JEFF got to his feet. He picked up his soft hat and jammed it on his head with an impatient gesture. He understood now the look of amusement with which the telephone operator had favored him when he announced himself as the new president. Probably the whole office-force was laughing at him. It was not a pleasant thought. He had a sudden longing for the wide spaces, away from all this bickering and annoyance.

"So be it," he said. "Business looks to me like a pretty rotten game. I'm glad to be out of it. I'll just go on being a rolling stone—and you two can supply me with fresh moss on every dividend day."

Simeon Hanchett cleared his throat.

"Don't count too much on dividends," he advised.

Jeff laughed derisively, albeit much startled.

"My uncle's interest kept him in a fair degree of luxury. I'll be content with as much."

"No doubt you would. But the situation has changed since your uncle's death. Mr. Hobbs and I are no longer bound by old-fashioned salary ideas, for one thing. It is really simpler to split the profits in the form of salaries than to bother with dividends."

"Do you mean to say that my stock will pay me nothing at all?"

Hanchett smiled. He seemed to be enjoying the interview.

"Of course, if a balance should remain after we have drawn the salaries we think we are entitled to, a dividend may be declared. It's rather a long chance, though, if you want my candid opinion."

Jeff's bronzed, boyish face was a study in mixed emotions. Events were moving so rapidly that he found difficulty in keeping pace with them. In less than half an hour his position had changed from that of a king awaiting coronation to that of a discredited pretender. That these men had the power they claimed he did not for a moment doubt. It needed only one look at their implacable faces to convince him that they would use it to the limit. Their amused contempt was apparent in the glances which they exchanged. Jeff's temper, which thus far he had held under remarkably good control, began to get away from him. Yet he forced his voice to a casual tone.

"You said something about being fair. Just what did you mean by that?"

"We will pay you," said Hanchett affably with a wink at Hobbs, "five thousand dollars for your entire interest in this company. I consider it a very generous offer. With that sum you can buy——"

Utterly without premeditation, Stone's big fist lashed out and landed full on the smiling mouth. The swivel chair and its

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bulky occupant crashed to the floor. Spiderish little Hobbs scuttled under the table, shrieking for help.

Hanchett heaved himself up on an elbow, clawed open a drawer of his desk, and his shaking fingers closed over the butt of a blued-steel automatic.

Jeff seized a heavy ruler from the table and struck as a snake strikes. The pistol dropped back in the drawer. Hanchett nursed his wounded knuckles and joined his voice to that of the panic-stricken Secretary in a bellow for help.

There was a medley of cries and a rush of feet in the drafting-room on which one door of the private office opened. Stone threw open the door to face a scared-looking group of draftsmen, armed with sharp-pointed compasses, rulers, stray bits of wood, and such other haphazard weapons as their hands had found on the instant of alarm.

"Wh-wh-what's happened?" stammered their leader, a tall, stoop-shouldered person whose thin red Vandyke only partially concealed his chinless condition.

Jeff met their gaze fairly, and they shrank back from the fighting glint in his eyes.

"Mr. Hanchett has had an—accident," he said with deliberate meaning. And he added significantly, "If any one tries to stop me, or to follow me, I'll guarantee that there will be more accidents!"

Then he was out on the street, swinging along with the space-annihilating stride of a woodsman, wondering vaguely if he were not in the grip of a nightmare dream from which he would presently awake.

II

MECHANICALLY he turned toward the Manufacturers' Hotel where he had registered on his arrival at Millville, and whence, after a visit to the bank to secure his stock, he had gone straight to the office of the structural company. As he entered the lobby, a hand was laid on his arm, and he whirled with ready fists clenched, half expecting to see a policeman. In his mood at that moment he would cheerfully have tackled a whole platoon of police.

"Don't shoot, mister. I'll come down," said a laughing voice.

Stone's angry eyes looked into the gleaming spectacles of a short young man, inclined to early stoutness, whose cherubic face and infectious grin were hauntingly familiar.

"Hullo!" said Jeff, his belligerent expression fading. "I'll place you in half a shake. Let's see. You must be——"

"Perry P. Price, Attorney and Counselor at Law. Also, Tony Thompson's tenderfoot friend."

Then Jeff remembered, and memory brought a reminiscent smile to his face. The lawyer's stay on the ranch had been brief but full of incident. Despite the efforts of Tony Thompson, proprietor of the Bar-T, Price had been the good-natured victim of almost every practical joke in the cowboy category. Jeff had intervened on one occasion in time to turn the laugh on the jokers.

"I've got you now," he chuckled. "You are the sportsman who shot fourteen innocent gopher-snakes in one afternoon because the boys told you they were rattlers."

"Discovered! And you are the helpful person who smuggled them into the bunkhouse for me and distributed them where they would do the most good. I told you then that I'd buy you a drink some time. Step into this adjacent caravansary with me and I'll pay up."

Stone was in no mood for conviviality. He hesitated, studying the smiling face before him.

For all their expression of perpetual amusement with the world, the gray eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles were shrewd and eminently intelligent. Out of place as he had been on the ranch, here in his own habitat the plump young attorney radiated a sense of maturity and sound judgment. Moreover, he was by way of being a friend. And Jeff felt the need of a friend for the first time in many, many moons.

"I'll go you," he agreed, "to the extent of one drink. Then I want to consult you professionally. I'm in a maze and a tangle and a twist. I need somebody to help me straighten the blamed thing out—somebody that I can trust."

"Tangles and twists are my specialty," boasted the lawyer, leading the way through the swinging doors, "and it's an amazing maze that I can't find a way out of. When we've drowned the memory of those gopher-snakes we'll go up to my office and you can tell your ghastly tale."

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IT WAS with a thoroughly alert and businesslike attention that Price heard the saga of Stone's experiences from the time of the arrival of his uncle's letter to his stormy departure from the office of the structural company. The letter he read carefully.

"I ought to help you out of your troubles," he remarked, "as I'm probably responsible for getting you into them."

"How's that?"

"I drew up this will your uncle speaks of, and I told him about meeting you in New Mexico. The old man was interested, took down your address, and wanted to know all about you. Remembering that snake incident, I drew a rather flattering word-picture of your ability and resourcefulness."

"I wondered where he got my address."

"I'm the guilty party. But for that conversation it's dollars to doughnuts that you would now be cavorting about the wilds of Maine, instead of muddling your brain over high finance."

"If that's the case," said Jeff, "I don't know whether to thank you or beat you up."

"It will suit me just as well if you do neither. Getting down to brass tacks, just what do you want to accomplish in this affair?"

Stone knitted his brows.

"For one thing, I want dividends on my stock. Can't you file suit against the company and make it pay me forty per cent. of the earnings—make Hobbs and Hanchett reduce their salaries until something is left for dividends?"

Price shook his head dubiously.

"The thing is possible, of course, but it would mean a long fight through the courts, with the result always in doubt. I know of a big tool-manufacturing concern—one of the largest in this country—which has never paid a dividend, for the same reason. The officers, elected by the majority interest, allow themselves and their favored employees such tidy salaries that nothing is left. The minority interest has been fighting for ten years to break the combination, but so far the result has been absolute zero. It's mighty hard to prove that a man isn't worth any salary he can get.

"By threatening suit, though, you might bluff them into paying a better figure for your stock. They might double their offer, or even more. If that will satisfy you, I'll go up and see what I can do."

Stone's fist smote the flat desk.

"No, I'll be hanged if that satisfies me! I'm not going to sell out. My uncle gave me his stock with the idea that I would take an active part in the business. His letter reads as if he wanted me to be the dominating force—to take hold and change things. Probably he didn't realize what I would be up against. No doubt Hobbs and Hanchett sang pretty small while the old man was in control. But that makes no difference. I'm going to play the game through, and I'll not be content until I've done the job my uncle set for me!"

"What's your program?" The lawyer grinned.

"At the moment, the only plan I can think of is to beat Hanchett up every time he sticks his head out of the office. Maybe he'd see the error of his ways after a few weeks in hospital. What about it?"

PRICE laughed outright.

"I see you are a believer in direct methods. Your way is a little too primitive for Millville, I fear. Just the same, you are approaching my own particular line of endeavor. I'm a sure-enough, honest-to-goodness lawyer, Stone, but the kind of case I really like is the kind that can't be won in court. This affair of yours seems to be right in my line."

He looked speculatively at his client.

"Has it occurred to you," he went on, "that Hobbs and Hanchett are acting rather peculiarly in this matter? Allowing that they want to grab all the profits for themselves, there was no need of their being quite so vicious about it. Their natural course, it seems to me, would have been to put you to work at a small salary, fix their own salaries to suit themselves, and buy you out later when you kicked about the absence of dividends."

"It hadn't occurred to me," confessed Stone, "but it does now. What's the answer?"

"My guess is that for certain reasons they are afraid to have you around the office at all. You're not a business man, my son, and you haven't the business point of view. There were things going on in that business that shocked even your uncle, and he wasn't thin-skinned. Perhaps he gave them an inkling of his plan for you to come in and

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clean house. Otherwise, I can't see why they should have been in such a hurry to get you finally disposed of. They evidently wanted to discourage you and buy you out for a song before you got a chance to find out anything."

"They'd have succeeded if they hadn't overplayed their hand," Jeff admitted. "I was so thoroughly buffaloed for a few minutes there in the office, that if Hanchett had offered me par for my stock I'd have taken it and hiked for the tall timbers."

"Just so. But you didn't sell out, and that's the main thing." The lawyer eyed his client narrowly. "Stone, there's a chance that we can win out in this affair. It seems to me worth trying. But if I take the case you'll have to put yourself squarely in my hands and do the things I tell you to, even when they sound foolish. Will you do it?"

Stone made a gesture of acquiescence.

"Go as far as you like, Major."

"You will obey orders without asking questions?"

"Nary a question."

Price jerked open a filing-cabinet and drew from it a bulky folder filled with printed and typewritten slips of paper of all shapes and sizes. These he sorted over rapidly, talking while he worked.

"Whenever a bit of information comes my way—something that looks interesting yet has no bearing on any case I have under consideration—I chuck it into this disreputable-looking file. Most of it I never use, but occasionally—ah, here it is!"

He leaned back in his chair and studied a paper which had evidently been the object of his search.

"So far I haven't much more than a healthy suspicion," he went on, "and it's better that you shouldn't even know what that suspicion is until we've proven whether or not it is correct. You'll play your part more naturally and not be led into saying things that might ball you up."

"I'm in the hands of my friends," said Jeff.

"If I thought I had a system for beating the roulette wheel at Monte Carlo, before I risked the maximum on every turn I'd try it out with a few small bets. And I wouldn't do my experimenting at the Casino, either. Have you such a thing as a visiting-card?"

MUCH mystified, Jeff fished from his pocket a bit of pasteboard which he passed over for the other's inspection.

"Good!" said the lawyer. "Simply your name, 'Jefferson Stone.' Now please write across the top, 'Kern Building.' Thank you. Now, in the lower left-hand corner: 'Cuba is after a job.'"

Resolutely repressing his curiosity, Stone did as directed.

"I want you to take an afternoon train for Hubtown. You'll get in there sometime tomorrow—around noon, I think. Put up at the Pavonia Hotel. Then send this card by messenger to—" the lawyer consulted the mysterious paper—"to the Demarest Steel Construction Company."

"Yes, Colonel." Jeff's face was a sunburned interrogation.

The lawyer grinned.

"Then you'll stick around the hotel and await developments. There may not be any, in which case we'll have to try a different plan. But I'm willing to lay odds that before the day is over you have a caller. Let the other man do the talking. This is imperative. Beyond admitting your identity, all the information I want you to give is that you own an interest in the Millville Structural Steel Company, and that Cuba is after a job."

"That sounds simple enough," said Jeff. "Anything else?"

"Only this: don't be satisfied with less than double any sum of money that is offered you; and demand currency, or at least a check made to you personally."

Jeff stared.

"Do you mean to say that some one is likely to gallop up and offer me money? I don't get your drift."

"The thing is possible. In fact, if my diagnosis of the case is correct, it's a whole lot more than possible—it's probable."

"And if this generous person does force wealth on me, what's my next move?"

"Come back to Millville. And don't waste time getting here."

Stone brought his hand to his forehead in a military salute.

"All right, General," he said submissively. "It surely is the wildest proposition I ever was up against. But I'll try anything once."

And he went back to the hotel to pack his bag.

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"ASK Mr. Demarest to come to my room, please."

There was a puzzled frown on Stone's face as he hung up the receiver of the wall-telephone in his room at the Hotel Pavonia. So far the experiment was working out in exact accordance with Price's prediction. Less than two hours had elapsed since a messenger had carried his card with its cryptic notation to the office of the Demarest Steel Construction Company, and already a visitor was announced.

The young adventurer in the realms of business rather dreaded the coming interview. He was to play a part, to use finesse, to pretend to knowledge which he did not possess and of whose very nature he had not the most remote idea. He wondered if there were anything in his appearance that would give the game away.

The reflection in the wash-stand mirror should have been reassuring. The face that looked back at him from the polished glass, for all its sun-tanned youth, was clear-cut and alert. His clothes were the handiwork of a good tailor, and his sense of physical fitness gave him an air of confidence which he was far from feeling. He wished that Price had been a bit more communicative. He doubted his ability to bluff the situation through. Yet, when at the sound of a sharp knock he swung his room door wide, no one could have guessed from his manner that he was not thoroughly at ease.

The man who entered was well past middle-age, but slender, erect, very carefully dressed, almost foppish in appearance. He inspected Stone through his nose glasses with eyes as beadily inquisitive as those of an English sparrow.

"Mr. Vincent Demarest," said Jeff. "I am very glad to see you, sir."

"And I you, Mr. Stone," said Demarest, clasping his host's hand in thin but remarkably powerful fingers. "I seldom attend to matters of this nature myself, but when Mr. Jefferson Stone comes to town I want to meet him. I had expected to see an older man, Mr. Stone. A much older man."

"No doubt you expected to see my uncle. He died several weeks ago, leaving his interest in the business to me. The names are the same."

Jeff led his visitor to a chair and seated himself in another.

"Ah, that explains—a number of things! The new broom is preparing to sweep more territory, eh?"

Stone smiled non-committally.

The visitor produced the card with its scribbled inscription.

"Just what does this mean?"

"Exactly what it says: 'Cuba is after a job.' "

"And does Cuba expect to get it?"

Jeff smiled again.

"What is your opinion, Mr. Demarest?"

The dapper little man was silent for a long moment. He puffed meditatively at a cigar which Stone had provided. When he spoke his voice had lost its affable, half-jesting quality.

"Mr. Stone, in coming here on such an errand you are violating one of the articles of an agreement with the terms of which I assume you are thoroughly familiar. I will not discuss the morality of that agreement, or its validity in law; but your self-interest should hold you faithful to it."

Jeff said nothing.

"If you persist in this course," urged Demarest, "the consequences will most certainly react on you. Take an older man's advice and give up the project. Come out to dinner with me; meet some of the representative men in the business; see a bit of Hubtown; make it a pleasure trip. I am advising you for your own good."

Jeff still was silent.

"Well, Mr. Stone?"

"Cuba is after a job," was the parrot-like answer.

"Is that your firm decision?" The voice was as cold and hard as frosted steel.

Stone nodded, wondering what it all meant.

"For the sake of one extra golden egg you'd kill the goose, eh?"

"Cuba," began Jeff mechanically, "is after——"

Vincent Demarest raised a delicate and exquisitely manicured hand.

"Please do not say that again," he implored. "It irritates me beyond expression. Cuba will not get the job, and you know it as well as I do. This is a plain hold-up, from a quarter where I should least have expected it. However—" he drew a note-case from his pocket—"I came prepared for such a contingency. How much, Mr. Stone?"

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JEFF was somewhat at a loss. This was a development which Price's instructions did not cover. He dared do nothing more than paraphrase the formula which thus far had seemed so productive of results.

"I have heard nothing yet," he said slowly, "that would tempt me to change one word in the statement I have already made."

The visitor's smile was acidulous.

"Would five thousand dollars induce you to change the tense?"

Jeff shook his head, and not a muscle of his face betrayed his amazement at the sum.

Demarest's thin hand beat angrily on the arm of his chair.

"In Heaven's name, man, what *do* you want?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Price had said to accept not less than double the sum offered.

"Outrageous! Absurd! What sort of a get-rich-quick game do you think you are in?"

"If that's the way you feel," said Stone doggedly, "I can only say what I said before: Cuba is after ——"

"——! Take it, you robber!" Rapidly Demarest counted off ten one-thousand-dollar bills, and restored the depleted note-case to his pocket. "Now, what do you say?"

"Cuba *was* after a job," grinned Jeff, stowing the bills carefully away.

Mr. Vincent Demarest stood up and extended his hand. His irritation seemed to have vanished. As they shook hands he cocked his head to one side, and his beady little eyes gleamed quizzically at the bronzed young giant before him.

"Now that Cuba has invaded Hubtown, look out for Japan in Millville," he warned.

"I've been hearing about the yellow peril all my life," parried Jeff, "but so far it's never bothered us much."

Demarest laughed, and this time his laugh was genial.

"Well, I'll notify you before Japan attacks your stronghold. If Cuba covets another job in Hubtown, be sure to see me before you do anything rash."

And the little man minced daintily out of the room, evidently well pleased with the result of the interview, leaving Stone staring dazedly after him.

III

WHEN Jeff had finished his story, Perry P. Price lighted a fat cigar, hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and leaned back in his swivel-chair with an expression of extreme self-satisfaction on his face.

"That—clinches it!" he said between puffs. "Any man who can guess as well as I can ought to be in the Weather Bureau."

"Clinches what?"

"It changes my patchwork theory into a proven fact. I notice by the afternoon paper that the two-million-dollar Kern Building in Hubtown was contracted for this morning, and that the Demarest Steel Construction Company was awarded the contract for the steel framework. I might add that I've had some dealings with Kern, and I knew the contract was about to be let before I sent you to Hubtown."

"I wish," said Jeff rather impatiently, "that you'd come down to cases. I'm fed up on mysteries. I did enough guessing on my way back from Hubtown. Loosen up and tell me what you know."

"My knowledge is fragmentary," grinned the lawyer, "but the pieces seem to fit together fairly well. I'll give you the sections of the puzzle as they came to me."

He opened the filing-cabinet which stood beside his desk, and fished out a slip of paper. This he studied for a moment, then passed it across the desk to his client. It was a printed form and read as follows:

Africa	
Algeria	
Argentine	Owner.....
Asia	
Balkans	Arch.....
Berlin	
Buenos Aires	Gen. Contractor.....
Colombia	
Cuba	.....
Europe	
France	Description.....
Greece	
India	.....
Japan	
London	.....
Naples	
Paris	Date Set.....
Rome	
Vienna	

"It looks like a lesson in geography," puzzled Jeff. "Cuba and Japan certainly sound familiar. It's a code of some kind,

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I suppose." He looked questioningly at the lawyer.

"You might call it 'Exhibit A,'" said Price. "Some months ago I ordered a supply of letter-heads from one of the Millville printers. When they were delivered I found two of these slips in the package, doubtless enclosed by mistake. Hoddy Jacobs, Contracting Engineer of the Brundage Structural Company, came in just as I was throwing them in the waste-basket. I tossed one of the slips over to him and asked him what it meant, as the reference to architects and general contractors gave me a notion that it was something in his line. Like a shot he asked me where I got it. When I told him, he swore a blue streak *and tore up the slip!*

"Naturally that aroused my curiosity, and I pressed Jacobs for an explanation; but the best I got was a cock-and-bull story about an organization among the structural steel companies for the collection of accounts. The geographical list along the margin, Hoddy admitted, covers the code-names of the companies in the agreement. Your company's code name is Cuba, as you may have guessed, and I have the names of the other Millville concerns. You can study them at your leisure.

"It all might have been plausible enough if I hadn't known that Jacobs had nothing to do with accounts, and if it had not been so obvious that he was badly scared. However, I pretended to be convinced, and let the subject drop. I was just sufficiently interested to file away the other slip after he had gone, and to jot down the data he had given me. Then I forgot all about it for the time being."

THE lawyer drew from the file another sheet of paper.

"Here is another link in the chain. A man came to me not long ago with a real-estate scheme that was so high-flavored I could not handle it. I explained to him as gently as I could that it was several degrees too rotten for even a lawyer to tackle, whereupon he undertook to justify it by showing that there were worse things in the world. My stenographer took down the whole conversation. I'll read you the part that concerns us."

Price wiped his glasses, and read:

" 'Aw, this ain't so bad. If you think my game is crooked, look at the structural steel business. Say, I got a brother in that line in Hubtown. He tells me they fix every job. All the concerns get together and decide which is to have the contract and what the price will be. The company that takes the job pays each of the others for putting in a higher bid. They never add less than a hundred per cent. profit, and they're perfectly respectable business men, too. Why, that's a regular burglar's game compared to this little scheme of mine. I don't see what you're kicking about.' "

Price laid down the paper.

"There's more to the same effect," he said, "but that's the really vital part."

"I begin to see a glimmer of light," Jeff nodded. "What's next?"

"Next you come with your uncle's letter, which intimates that Hanchett and Hobbs have adopted evil practises. With the fragments I already had, it wasn't hard to fit the picture together. Still, I wasn't sure. If my guess was correct, the announcement that 'Cuba was after a job' on the eve of the letting of the Kern contract would cause some excitement among the Hubtown structural companies. It seems I was correct."

"Why did you send me to Demarest? Aren't they all in the game?"

"They're all in it, but Demarest's company is the largest in Hubtown. Furthermore, Kern told me that at equal prices he would give Demarest the contract."

Stone's face wore a puzzled frown.

"Tell it again, please, in words of one syllable," he implored.

Price laughed.

"Why, here's the way it figures out: the structural steel companies in Millville and Hubtown—perhaps in other sections of the country—have formed an alliance for the elimination of competition. They report to some central agency whenever they are asked to bid on a job. The central office puts them in touch with each other, and they fix prices to suit their ideas of what the traffic will bear.

"I judge from Demarest's remarks to you that the Millville companies have agreed not to look for business in Hubtown, and *vice versa;* but Demarest couldn't stop to argue ethics with a plum like the Kern contract about to drop in his lap. He paid you $10,000 for not putting in a bid. That will give you some idea of the extra profits they are adding."

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"Good Lord!" gasped Stone. "Isn't that illegal?"

"About as much so as highway robbery."

JEFF drew from his pocket the roll of yellow bills and held them at arm's length, between thumb and finger. He wrinkled his nose.

"Tainted money," he commented. "I don't like the aroma."

"I wouldn't be too squeamish. Any dividends you might draw from your stock under present conditions would be just as gamey."

"That was the practise my uncle disapproved of—the one he hoped I would change."

"Not a doubt of it. And you are going to use that very practise to pry yourself into the presidency of the Millville Structural Steel Company."

Jeff stared.

"I'm listening," he said.

"Assuming that you haven't forgotten everything you learned at college, you should still be able to read a blue-print. Am I right?"

"Correct," agreed Stone. "Given a slide-rule and a Carnegie Handbook, I could make a fair shift at figuring a structural steel job. I could take off quantities and estimate weights. If I had a mill-card of extras for fabrication I could even bluff at pricing the job."

"Excellent! I don't think all that will be necessary; but it's good to know that we can play the game through if we have to."

The lawyer lifted the telephone receiver from the hook.

"Central 7-3-5," he demanded, and a moment later: "Let me speak to Mr. Goldberg, please. Hello, Moses. This is Perry Price. Have you an extra set of blue-prints for that building? Yes, the big one—the office building. A client of mine wants to submit a figure on the steelwork. Bids close tomorrow at four o'clock, you say? Well, my client will have to get busy. Thank you. I'll send right up for the plans."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Jeff.

"You are now in business for yourself. You are—let me see—The Stone Structural Company, and you can share this office rent-free. Moses Goldberg is putting some of the profits of the Mammoth Emporium into an office building that will make the rest of Millville's sky-scrapers look like chicken-coops. The Stone Structural Company will open its career by bidding on that job. I'll see that tomorrow morning's Millville *Chronicle* has an item to that effect."

"Machiavelli had nothing on you," laughed Jeff. "I begin to understand your wicked plot."

"You don't see all of it yet," said Perry P. Price. "You'd better chase up to the Mammoth Emporium, now, and get those blue-prints."

IV

ON THE following morning Stone had hardly seated himself at the flat desk in Price's office with the big roll of blue-prints ostentatiously spread out before him, when the door opened to admit a visitor—a lanky young man of about his own age, who introduced himself as Mr. Amos Metzgar, Contracting Engineer of the Millville Structural Steel Company.

"I noticed that you had opened up here," he explained, "so I thought I would come around and get acquainted."

Jeff shook hands hurriedly.

"You'll excuse me if I ask you to call some other time," he apologized. "I have quite a bit to do before four o'clock," and he indicated the blue-prints, which very obviously had not escaped the others' attention.

Metzgar drew up a chair and sat down.

"If that job is all that is bothering you," he said easily, "you have all the time there is. You're not going to put in a figure?"

"Oh, I'll probably not get the contract," deprecated Stone, "but making up the estimate is good practise and my name on the list of bidders will be good advertising."

"I said you were not going to put in a figure," persisted Metzgar.

Jeff raised his eyebrows.

"Unless something occurs to change my present intention, I most certainly am."

"That's what I am here for—to change your intention."

"When you say 'I,' do you mean 'Cuba'?" asked Stone.

"You're on, I see. I told Hanchett that notice in the *Chronicle* looked queer. Yes, of course that's what I mean."

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"In that case," said Jeff, "I can deal only with principals. If Mr. Hanchett and Mr. Hobbs care to call, I'll hear what they have to say. You can tell them, if you like," he added with a reminiscent smile, "that it is perfectly safe."

"I'll tell them," promised Metzgar, "but you're making a bad mistake. I am the easiest man to deal with in that crowd."

When the visitor had gone, Perry P. Price stepped out from the adjoining room, through whose half-open door he had been listening to the conversation.

"Good work!" he approved. "If they come here we'll have them right where we want them."

Stone was dubious.

"Do you really believe," he questioned, "that Hanchett will fall for any game like this? I wouldn't, it seems to me. I doubt if they come."

"It is apparent that you never were troubled by a bad conscience," countered the lawyer. "It is very stimulating to the imagination. The minute Metzgar makes his report Hanchett and Hobbs will begin working their brains double-time, trying to figure out how much you know. Don't worry; they'll come."

AN HOUR later his prediction was verified.

"Mr. Stone," said Hanchett through lips that were still a trifle swollen, "I am not here to discuss anything that has passed. It would seem that in some way you have become conversant with conditions existing in the structural business that are not generally known. I presume you hope to profit by that knowledge. Within reasonable limits I am willing that you should do so. It only remains for you to name the sum that will induce you to refrain from bidding on the Goldberg building—or, better still, to allow us to write the figures in your bid."

Jeff shook his head.

"I can't do that without reverting to the discussion we had in your office the other day. If I were an officer—say the president—of the Millville Structural Steel Company, the Stone Structural Company would immediately cease to be. That's the only sort of bribe that would attract me."

A mirthless smile contorted the other's bruised lips.

"I imagined you might have some such idea in mind," was his even-toned comment. "You dream too much, Stone. I offered to buy your stock, and that's all I'll do. You can't put over a hold-up like that. I suppose you got that inside dope from your uncle, eh?"

"Never mind the source," said Jeff. "I've got it."

"Quite so. And I'm offering you a chance to cash it in. We'll make it worth your while to stay off the Goldberg job."

Stone's negative was emphatic.

"I've named my terms. Accept them or take the consequences."

Little Hobbs, who had been fidgeting in nervous silence, now spoke up.

"What do you mean by—consequences? You wouldn't do anything to hurt the reputation of your uncle's old company, would you?"

"Don't let him bluff you, Dave!" roared Hanchett. "Let him go ahead. His bid can't hurt us much. He has no plant, no money——"

"Perhaps I have more money than you think," interjected Stone, patting the pocket which held Demarest's contribution. There was confidence in his manner, but despair in his heart. It was just as he had feared. These people had called for a show-down, and his hand seemed to be a bob-tail flush. He wondered what Price expected him to do next.

JUST then the lawyer walked into the room, in one hand a fountain-pen, and in the other a typewritten document which he laid on the desk before which Stone sat. The pen he extended invitingly to Hanchett.

"I'd like your signature here, Simeon, and yours too, David," he said with brisk authority.

"My signature to what?" growled the big General Manager.

"To a voting-agreement covering your stock in the Millville Structural Steel Company, along the same general lines as that which you had with the elder Stone, my client, to control the vote. If that paper is not signed within the next five minutes I shall start for the office of the District Attorney. I think he would be interested in what I could tell him about your business methods. Perhaps Moses Goldberg would like to hear the story, also."

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"What!" exploded Jeff. "This is——"

Simeon Hanchett whirled on him, his face apoplectic with rage.

"You'd stoop to blackmail, would you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I'll be hanged if I will!" cried Stone. "Price, that goes beyond my limit!"

"It is out of your hands." The little lawyer's face was stern. There was nothing humorous in the glint of the steel-gray eyes behind the spectacles. "I'm managing this case, and I play to win. I don't care a cuss for the method. Hanchett, you and Hobbs know me, and you know how many scruples I'm reputed to have when I think the right's on my side. I would advise you to sign."

Hobbs wrung his hands and moaned inarticulately, palsied with fright. But his associate was made of sterner stuff.

"I won't put myself in that young cub's power!" he stormed. "Go to it, you shyster! You can raise the devil with our business, but the District Attorney will have hard work to hang anything on us."

"How about that Wrentham Street bridge job, for the City of Millville, where you swore before a notary public that you were not in collusion with any of the other bidders? I've got the goods on you, Simeon."

Hanchett's flushed face turned a ghastly gray.

"I'll sign," he muttered, reaching for the paper. But little Hobbs was before him.

"Give me that pen!" he shrieked.

WHEN Hanchett and Hobbs had departed, still too relieved at the danger they had escaped to be capable of other sensations, Stone looked at the lawyer with a rueful smile.

"Why didn't you tell me what you planned to do? I never would have agreed to a blackmailing scheme," I protested with heat.

Perry P. Price was strutting about the room looking like an extremely self-satisfied cherub. He beamed on his client.

"That wasn't blackmail. It was bluff. I didn't know anything about the Wrentham Street bridge, beyond the fact that on all city jobs the bidders have to swear there is no collusion. All I had was a suspicion, which it would have been hard to verify. But a suspicion was enough. Hanchett's guilty imagination supplied all the facts I lacked."

Stone shrugged his shoulders.

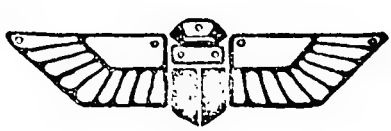
"Bribery, corruption, conspiracy—this business is a sweet-smelling flower, isn't it!" he exclaimed.

The lawyer's shrewd eyes twinkled, and he tilted his head to one side.

"A business is like a political party," he said oracularly; "it may be destroyed from without, but it must be reformed from within. Your uncle wanted you to do the latter, didn't he? Well—you are in!"

Jeff considered the matter. His dreams began to come back to him. Once more he could visualize himself as a young king mounting the throne of a nation. That it was an unruly nation, filled with warring factions, only added glamour to the dream. He got to his feet.

"You are right," he said. "I am in, and ought to be at work. If you listen closely you may hear wails of anguish in the structural business today. I'm going to start my career as president of the Millville Structural Steel Company by smashing the combination on that Goldberg building."



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The Winds of the World

A THREE-PART STORY—PART II

By Talbot Mundy

Author of "Hookum Hai!" "The Soul of a Regiment," "Gulbaz and the Game," etc.

SYNOPSIS—At the house of *Yasmini*, the entrancing, gather plotters and politicians from all India, and with them Subahdar-Major *Ranjoor Singh*, a Sikh officer of "Outram's Own," who by foreign tradesmen is offered much if he will influence the Sikhs to fail England, should gathering war-clouds break. *Singh* withholds his answer, kicks a despised Afridi hillman aside, and goes to the barracks. The Afridi, in revenge, knifes a Sikh trooper and is pursued by a second whom he traps in an old house. Learning of the murder, the Subahdar-Major goes hunting on his own account. A fat babu points the way to *Singh*, the latter breaks into the house single-handed—and does not reappear.

Kirby, Colonel of "Outram's Own," who has steadily refused to believe treachery possible in the regiment, is forced to send for *Singh* in the face of proof that the latter has associated with German merchants at *Yasmini's*. The Subahdar-Major can not be found. In the meantime war is declared. Knowing that his regiment will be among the first to sail for Europe, refused immediate assistance from the police, and having no authority to mak ean official search, *Kirby* in desperation sets out with Captain *Warrington* to find *Singh*. They are directed to the old house wherein *Singh* was said to have gone. The house they find in flames.

CHAPTER VI

The North Wind hails from the Northern snows,
(His voice is loud—oh, listen ye!)
He cried of death—the death he knows—
Of the mountain death. (Oh, listen ye!)
Who looks to the North for love looks long!
Who goes to the North for gain goes wrong!
Men's hearts are hard, and the goods belong
To the strong in the North! (Oh, listen ye!)
Whose lot is fair—who loves his life—
Walks wide, stays wide of the Northern knife!
(Ye men o' the world, oh listen ye!)

Yasmini's Song.

THERE were police and to spare now, nor any doubt of it. Even the breath of war's beginnings could not keep them elsewhere when a fire had charge in the densest quarter of the danger zone. The din of ancient Delhi roared skyward, and the Delhi crowd surged and fought to be nearer to the flame; but the police already had a cordon around the building, and another detachment was forcing the swarms of men and women into eddying movement in which something like a system developed presently, for there began to be a clear space in which the fire brigade could work.

"Any bodies recovered?" asked Colonel Kirby, leaning from the seat of his high dog-cart to speak to the English fireman who stood sentry over the water-plug.

"No, sir. The fire had too much headway before the alarm went in. When we got here the whole lower part was red hot."

"Any means of escape from the building, from the rear?"

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"As many as from a rat-run, sir. That house is as old as Delhi—about; and there are as many galleries up above connecting with houses at the rear as there are run-holes from cellar to cellar."

"Any chance for anybody in the cellar?"

"Doubt it, sir. The fire started there; the water'll do what the fire left undone. Pretty bad trap, sir, if you asked me—bad as they come!"

"No reports of escape or rescue?"

"None that I've heard tell of."

"And the house seems doomed, eh? Be some days before they can sort the debris over?"

"Lucky if we save the ten houses nearest it! Look, sir! There she goes!"

The roof fell in, sending five separate volleys of red sparks up into the cloudy night as floor after floor collapsed beneath the weight. The thunder of it was almost drowned in a roar of delight, for the crowd, sensing the new spirit of its masters, was in a mood for the terrible. Then silence fell, as if that had been an overture.

Out of the silence and through the sea of hot humanity, the white of his dress shirt showing through the unbuttoned front of a military cloak, Warrington rode a borrowed Arab pony, the pony's owner's *sais* running beside him to help clear a passage. Warrington was still humming to himself as he dismissed both *sais* and pony and climbed up beside Kirby in the dog-cart.

"If Ranjoor Singh's in that house, he's in a predicament," he said cheerfully. "I went to police headquarters, and the first officer I spoke to told me to go to ——. So I went into the next office, where all the big panjandrums hide—and some of the little ones—and they told me what you know, sir, that the house is in flames and every policeman who can be spared is on the job, so I came to see. If Ranjoor Singh's in there—but I don't believe he is!"

"Why don't you?"

"I don't believe the Lord 'ud send us active service—not a real red war against a real enemy—and play a low-down trick on Ranjoor Singh. Ranjoor Sing's a gentleman. It wouldn't be sportsmanlike to let him die before the game begins."

For a minute or two they watched the sparks go up, and the crowd striking at the rats that still seemed to find some place of exit.

"There's a place below there that isn't red-hot yet," said Kirby. "Those rats are not cooked through. Did you tell the police that you wanted a search warrant?

"Yes. Might as well argue with an ant-heap. All of 'em too busy tryin' for commissions in the Volunteers to listen. They've got it all cut an' dried—somebody in the basement upset a lamp accordin' to them—nobody upstairs—nobody to turn in the alarm until the fire had complete charge! They offer to prove it when the fire's out and they can sort the ashes."

"Um-m-m! Tell 'em a trooper of ours saw a light there?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

" 'Doubtless the lamp that was kicked over!' "

COLONEL KIRBY clucked to his horse and worked a way out to the edge of the crowd with the skill of one whose business is to handle men in quantity. Then, he shot like a dart up side-streets and made for barracks by a detour.

"Gad!" said Warrington suddenly.

"Who's told 'em, d'you suppose?"

"Dunno, sir. News leaks in Delhi like water from a lump of ice."

In the darkness of the barrack wall there were more than a thousand men, women and children, many of them Sikhs, who clamored to be told things; and by the gate was a guard of twenty men drawn up to keep the crowd at bay. The shrill voices of the women drowned the answers of the native officer as well as the noise of the approaching wheels, and the guard had to advance into the road to clear a way for its colonel.

The native officer saluted and grinned.

"Is it true, sahib?" he shouted, and Kirby raised his whip in the affirmative. From that instant the guard began to make more noise than the crowd beyond the wall.

Kirby whipped his horse and took the drive that led to his quarters at a speed there was no overhauling. He wanted to be alone. But his senior major had forestalled him and was waiting by his outer door.

"Oh, hello Brammle. Yes, come in."

"Is it peace, Jehu?" asked Brammle.

"War. We'll be the first to go. No, no route yet—likely to get it any mintue."

"I'll bet then. Bet you it's Bombay—a P. & O.—Red Sea and Marseilles! Oh, who

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wouldn't be light cavalry? First-class all the way, first aboard, and first crack at 'em! Any orders, sir?"

"Yes. Take charge. I'm going out, and Warrington's going with me. Don't know how long we'll be gone. If anybody asks for me, tell him I'll be back soon. Tell the men."

"Somebody's told 'em—listen!"

"Tell 'em that whoever misbehaves from now forward will be left behind. Give 'em my definite promise on that point!"

"Anything else, sir?"

"No."

"Then, see you later."

"See you later."

The Major went away, and Kirby turned to his adjutant.

"Go and order the closed "shay," Warrington. Pick a driver who won't talk. Have some grub sent in here to me, and join me at it in half an hour; shay fifteen minutes later. I've some things to see to."

Kirby wanted very much to be alone. The less actual contact a colonel has with his men, and the more he has with his officers, the better as a rule; but it does not pay to think in the presence of either. Officers and men alike should know him as a man-who-has-thought, in whose voice is neither doubt nor hesitation.

Thirty minutes later Warrington found him just emerging from a brown study.

"India's all roots-in-the-air an' dancin'!" he remarked cheerfully. "There was a babu sittin' by the barrack gate who offers to eat a German a day, as long as we'll catch 'em for him. He's the same man that was tryin' for a job as clerk the other day."

"Fat man?"

"Very."

"Uh-h-h! No credentials—bad hat! Send him packing?"

"The guard did."

Food was laid on a small table by a silent servant who had eyes in the back of his head and ears that would have caught and analyzed the lightest whisper; but the Colonel and his Adjutant ate hurriedly in silence, and the only thing remarkable that the servant was able to report to the regiment afterward was that both drank only water. Since all Sikhs are supposed to be abstainers from strong drink, that however was accepted as a favorable omen.

On time to the second, the shay arrived. It was the only closed carriage the regiment owned—a heavy C-springed landau thing, taken over from the previous mess. The Colonel peered through outer darkness at the box seat, but the driver did not look toward him; all he could see was that there was only one man on the box.

"Where to?" asked Warrington.

"The club."

Warrington jumped in after him, and the driver sent his pair straining at the traces as if they had a gun behind them. Three hundred yards beyond the barrack wall, Colonel Kirby knelt on the front seat and poked the driver from behind.

"Oh! You?" he remarked, as he recognized a native *rissaldar* of D Squadron. Until the novelty wears off it would disconcert any man to discover suddenly that his coachman is a troop commander.

"D'you know a person named Yasmini?" he asked.

"Who does not, sahib?"

"Drive us to her house—in a hurry!"

The immediate answer was a plunge as the whip descended on both horses and the heavy carriage began to sway like a boat in a beam-sea swell. They tore through streets that were living streams of humans—streams that split apart to let them through and closed like water again behind them. With his spurred heels on the front seat, Warrington hummed to himself as ever, happy, so long as there were only action.

"I've heard India spoken of as dead," he remarked after awhile. "Gad! Look at that color against the darkness!"

"If Ranjoor Singh is dead, I'm going to know it!" said Colonel Kirby. "And if he isn't dead, I'm going to dig him out or know the reason why. There's been foul play, Warrington. I happen to know that Ranjoor Singh has been suspected in a certain quarter. Incidentally, I staked my own reputation on his honesty this afternoon. And besides, we can't afford to lose a wing-commander such as he is on the eve of the real thing. We've got to find him!"

Once or twice as they flashed by a street-lamp they were recognized as British officers, and then natives, who would have gone to some trouble to seem insolent a few hours before, stopped to half-turn and salaam to them.

"Wonder how they'd like German rule for a change?" mused Warrington.

"India doesn't often wear her heart on her sleeve," said Kirby.

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"It's there tonight!" said Warrington. "India's awake, if this is Delhi and not a nightmare! India's makin' love to the British soldier-man!"

They tore through a city that is polychromatic in the daytime, and by night a dream of phantom silhouettes. But that night, day and night were blended in one uproar, and the Chandni Chowk was at flood-tide, wave on wave of excited human beings pouring into it from a hundred by-streets and none pouring out again.

So the *rissaldar* drove across the Chandni Chowk, fighting his way with the aid of whip and voice, and made a wide circuit through dark lanes where groups of people argued at the corners, and sometimes a would-be holy-man preached that the end of the world had come.

THEY reached Yasmini's from the corner farthest from the Chandni Chowk, and sprang out of the carriage the instant that the *rissaldar* drew rein.

"Wait within call!" commanded Kirby, and the *rissaldar* raised his whip.

Then, with his adjutant at his heels, Colonel Kirby dived through the gloomy opening in a wall that Yasmini devised to look as little like an approach to her—or heaven—as possible.

"Wonder if he's brought us to the right place?" he whispered, sniffing into the mouldy darkness.

"Dunno, sir. Try the stairs."

They caught the sound of faint flute music on an upper floor, and as Kirby felt cautiously for his footing on the lower step Warrington began to whistle softly to himself. Next to war, an adventure of this kind was the nearest he could imagine to sheer bliss, and it was all he could do to contrive to keep from singing.

The heavy teak stairs creaked under their joint weight, and though their eyes could not penetrate the upper blackness, yet they both suspected rather than sensed some one waiting for them at the top.

"Got your pistol, sir?" asked Warrington, feeling for his own; and Kirby's right hand sought a pocket in his cloak.

For thirty or more seconds—say three steps—they went up like conspirators, trying to move silently and holding to the rail, then the absurdity of that appealed to both at once, and without a word said, each stepped forward like a man, so that the staircase resounded.

They stumbled on a little landing after twenty steps, and wasted about a minute knocking on what felt like the panels of a door; but then Warrington peered into the gloom higher up and saw dim light.

So they essayed a second flight of stairs, in single file as before, and presently, when they had climbed some ten steps and had turned to negotiate ten more that ascended at an angle, a curtain moved a little and the dim light changed to a sudden shaft that nearly blinded them.

Then a heavy black curtain was drawn back on rings, and a hundred lights, reflected in a dozen mirrors, twinkled and flashed before them so that they could not tell which way to turn. Somewhere there was a glass-bead curtain, but there were so many mirrors that they could not tell which was the curtain and which were its reflections.

The curtains all parted, and from the midst of each there stepped a little nut-brown maid, who seemed too lovely to be Indian. Even then they could not tell which was maid and which reflections until she spoke.

"Will the sahibs give their names?" she asked in Hindustanee, in a voice that suggested flutes.

She smiled, and her teeth were whiter than a pipe-clayed sword-belt; there is nothing on earth whiter than her teeth were.

Without a second's hesitation Kirby answered—

"Colonel Kirby and Captain Warrington."

"Will the sahibs state their business?"

"No!"

"Then, whom do the sahibs seek to see?"

"Does a lady live here named Yasmini?"

"Surely, sahib."

"I wish to talk with her."

A dozen little maids seemed to step back through a dozen swaying curtains, and a second later for the life of them they could neither of them tell through which it was that the music came and the smell of musk and sandal-smoke. But she came back and beckoned to them, laughing over her shoulder and holding the middle curtain apart for them to follow.

So, one after the other they followed her, Kirby—as became a seriously-minded Colonel on the eve of war—feeling out of place

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and foolish, but Warrington, possessed by such curiosity as he had never yet tasted.

The heat inside the room they entered was oppressive, in spite of a great open window in which sat a dozen maids, and of the *punkahs* swinging overhead, so Kirby undid his cloak and walked revealed, a soldier in mess dress.

"Look at innocence aware of itself!" whispered Warrington.

"Shut up!" commanded Kirby, striding forward.

Not less than a dozen hillmen, of three or four different tribes, had sat back against one wall and looked suspicious when they entered, but at sight of Kirby's military clothes they had looked alarmed and moved as if a whip had been cracked not far away. The Northern adventurer does not care to be seen at his amusements, nor does he love to be looked in on by men in uniform.

But the little maid beckoned them on, still showing her teeth and tripping in front of them as if a gust of wind were blowing her. Her motion was that of a dance reduced to a walk for the sake of decorum.

Through another glass-bead curtain at the farther end of the long room she led them into a second room, all hung about with silks and furnished with deep-cushioned divans. There were mirrors in this room too, so that Kirby laughed aloud to see how incongruous and out of place he and his adjutant looked. His gruff laugh came so suddenly that the maid nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Will the sahibs be seated?" she asked almost in a whisper, as if they had half-frightened the life out of her, and then she ran out of the room so quickly that they were only aware of the jingling curtain.

So they sat down, Kirby trying the cushions with his foot until he found some firm enough to allow him to retain his dignity. (Cavalry dress-trousers are not built to sprawl on cushions in; a man should sit reasonably upright, or else stand.)

"I'll say this for myself," he grunted, as he settled into place, "it's the first time in my life I was ever inside a native woman's premises."

But Warrington did not commit himself to speech.

They sat for five minutes, looking about them, Warrington beginning to be bored, but Kirby honestly interested by the splendor of the hangings and the general atmosphere of Eastern luxury. It was Warrington who grew uneasy first.

"Feel as if any one was lookin' at you, sir?" he asked out of one side of his mouth. And then Kirby noticed it, and felt his collar awkwardly.

In all the world there is nothing so well calculated to sap a man's prepossession as the feeling that he is secretly observed. There was no sound, no movement, no sign of any one, and Warrington looked in the mirrors keenly while he pretended to be interested in his little moustache. Yet the sweat began to run down Colonel Kirby's temples, and he felt at his collar again to make sure that it stood upright.

"——, yes!" he said. "I'm going to get up and walk about."

He paced the length of the long room twice, turning quickly at each end, but detecting no movement and no eyes. Then he sat down again beside Warrington; but the feeling still persisted.

SUDDENLY a low laugh startled them, a delicious laugh, full of camaraderie, that would have disarmed the suspicion of a wolf. Just as unexpectedly a curtain less than a yard away from Kirby moved, and she stood before them. She could only be Yasmini. Besides, she had jasmine flowers worked into her hair.

Like a pair of bull buffaloes startled from their sleep, the Colonel and his Adjutant shot to their feet and faced her, and to their credit let it be recorded that they dropped their eyes, both of them. They felt like bounders. They hated themselves for breaking in on such loveliness.

"Will the sahibs not be seated again," she asked them in a velvet voice; and sweating in the neck they each sat down.

Now that the first feeling of impropriety had given way to curiosity, neither had eyes for anything but her. Neither had ever seen anything so beautiful, so fascinating—so impudently lovely. She was laughing at them; each knew it, yet neither felt resentful.

"Why?" she asked in Hindustanee. "First tell me why!"

And Colonel Kirby stammered because she had made him think of his mother, and the tender prelude to a curtain lecture. Yet this woman was not old enough to have been his wife!

"I—I—I came to ask about a friend of

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mine—by name Subahdar-Major Ranjoor Singh. I understand you know him?"

She nodded, and Kirby fought with a desire to let his mind wander. The subtle hypnotism that the East knows how to stage and use was creeping over him. She stood so close! She seemed so like the warm, soft spirit of all womanhood; only the measured rising and falling of her bosom under the gauzy drapery made her seem human and not a spirit. Subtly, ever so cunningly, she had contrived to touch a chord in Colonel Kirby's heart that he did not know lived any more. Warrington was speechless; he could not have trusted himself to speak. She had touched another chord in him.

"He came here more than once, or so I've been given to understand," said Kirby, and his own voice startled him, for it seemed harsh. "He is said to have listened to a lecture here—I was told the lecture was delivered by a German—and there was some sort of a fracas outside in the street afterward. I'm told some of his squadron were near, and they thrashed a man. Now Ranjoor Singh is missing."

"So?" said Yasmini, arching her whole lithe body into a setting for the prettiest yawn that Kirby had ever seen. "So the Jat is missing! Yes, he came here, sahib. He was never invited, but he came. He sat here saying nothing until it suited him to sit where another man was; then he struck the other man—so—with the sole of his foot—and took the man's place—and heard what he came to hear. Later, outside in the street, he and his men set on the Afridi whom he had struck with his foot and beat him."

"I have heard a variation of that," said Kirby.

"Have you ever heard, sahib, that he who strikes the wearer of a Northern knife is like to feel that knife? So Ranjoor Singh, the Jat, is missing?"

"Yes," said Kirby, frowning, for he was not pleased to hear Ranjoor Singh spoken of slightingly. A Jat may be a good enough man, and usually is, but a Sikh is a Jat who is better.

"And if he is missing, what has that to do with me?" asked Yasmini.

"I have heard—men say——"

"Yes?" she said, laughing, for it amused her almost more than any other thing to see dignity disarmed.

"Men say that you know most of what goes on in Delhi——"

"And—" She was Impudence, arrayed in gossamer.

Colonel Kirby pulled himself together; after all it was not for long that anything less than an army corps could make him feel unequal to a situation. This woman was the loveliest thing he had ever seen, but . . . .

"I've come to find out whether Ranjoor Singh's alive or dead," he said sternly, "and if he's alive to take him away with me."

She smiled as graciously as evening smiles on the seeded plains, and sank on to a divan with the grace it needs a life of dancing to bestow.

"Sahib," she said with a suddenly assumed air of candidness, "they have told the truth. There is little that goes on in Delhi—in the world—that I cannot hear of if I will. The winds of the world flow in and out of these four walls."

"Then, where is Ranjoor Singh?" asked Colonel Kirby.

She did not pause an instant. He was watching her amazing eyes that surely would have betrayed her had she been at a moment's loss; they did not change nor darken for a second.

"How much does the sahib know already?" she asked calmly, as if she wished to spare him a repetition of mere beginnings.

"A trooper of D Squadron—that's Ranjoor Singh's Squadron—was murdered in the bazaar this afternoon. The Subahdar-major went to the morgue to identify the body—drove through the bazaar, and possibly discovered some clue to the murderer. At all events, he is known to have entered a house in the bazaar, and that house is now in flames."

"The sahib knows that much? And am I to quell the flames?" asked Yasmini.

She neither sat nor lay on the divan. She was curled on it, leaning on an elbow, like an imp from another world.

"Who owns that house?" asked Kirby, since he could think of nothing else to ask.

"That is the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers," said Yasmini. "He who built it had eight wives, and a son by each. That was ages ago, and the descendants of the eight half-brothers are all at law about the ownership. There are many stories told about that house."

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Suddenly she broke into laughter, leaning on her hand and mocking them as Puck mocked mortals. A man could not doubt her. Colonel and Adjutant, both men who had seen grim service and both self-possessed as a rule, knew that she could read clean through them, and that from the bottom of her deep, wise soul she was amused.

"I am from the North," she said, "and the North is cold; there is little mercy in the hills, and I was weaned amid them. Yet—would the sahib not better beg of me?"

"How d'ye mean?" asked Kirby, surprised into speaking English.

"*Three days* ago there came a Wind that told *me* of war—of a world-war, surely not this time still-born. Two years ago the same Wind brought me news of its conception, though the talk of the world was then of universal peace and of horror at a war that was. Now, tonight, this greatest war is loose, born, and grown big within three days, but conceived two years ago—Russia, Germany, Austria, France, are fighting—is it not so? Am I wrong?"

"I came to ask about Ranjoor Singh," said Colonel Kirby, twisting at his closely cropped moustache.

There was a hint of iron in his voice, and he was obviously not the man to threaten and not fulfil. But she laughed in his face.

"All in good time!" she answered him. "You shall beg for your Ranjoor Singh, and then perhaps he shall step forth from the burning house! But first you shall know why you *must* beg."

She clapped her hands and a maid appeared. She gave an order, and the maid brought sherbet that Kirby sniffed suspiciously before tasting. Again she laughed deliciously.

"Does the sahib think that he could escape alive from this room, did I will otherwise?" she asked. "Would I need to drug—I who have so many means?"

Now it is a maxim of light cavalry that the best means of defense lies in attack; a threat of force should be met by a show of force, and force by something quicker. Kirby's eyes and his adjutant's met. Each felt for his hidden pistol. But she laughed at them with mirth that was so evidently unassumed that they blushed to their ears.

"Look!" she said, and they looked.

TWO great gray cobras, male and female, swayed behind them less than a yard away, balanced for the strike, hoods raised. The awful, ugly black eyes gleamed with malice. And a swaying cobra's head is not an easy thing to hit with an automatic-pistol bullet, supposing for wild imagination's sake that the hooded devil does not strike first.

"It is not wise to move!" purred Yasmini.

They did not see her make any sign, though she must have made one, for their eyes were fixed on the swaying snakes, and their brains were active wtih the problem of whether to try to shoot or not. It seemed to them that the snakes reached a resolution first, and struck. And in the same instant as each drew his pistol the hooded messengers of death were jerked out of sight, by hands that snatched at horsehair from behind the hangings.

"I have many such!" smiled Yasmini, and they turned to meet her eyes again, hoping she could not read the full of the fear in theirs. "But that is not why the sahib shall beg of me." (Kirby was not too overcome to notice the future tense.) "That is only a reason why the sahibs should forget their Western manners. But—if the pistols please the sahibs——"

They stowed their pistols away again and sat as if the very cushions might be stuffed with snakes, both of them aware that she had produced a mental effect which was more to her advantage than the pistols would have been had they made her a present of them. She gave a sudden, shrill cry that startled them and made them look wildly for the door; but she had done no more than command a *punkah-wallah*, and the heavy-beamed *punkah* began to swing rhythmically overhead, adding if that were possible to the mesmeric spell.

"Now," she said, "I will tell a little of the why of things." And Colonel Kirby hoped it was the *punkah*, and not "funk," that made the sweat stream down his neck until his collar was a mere uncomfortable mess. "For more than a year there has been much talk in India. The winds have brought it all to me. There was talk—and the Government has known it, for I am one of those who told the Government—of a ripe time for a blow for independence.

"There have been agents of another power, pretending to be merchants, who have sown their seed carefully in the

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bazaars. And then there went natives in the pay of the merchants, who had word with native sowars, saying that it is not well to be carried over sea to fight another's quarrels. All this the Government knew, though of course thou art not the Government, but only a soldier with a ready pistol and a dull wit."

"What bearing has this on Ranjoor Singh?" asked Kirby. It was so long since he had been spoken to so bluntly that he could not sit still under it.

"I am explaining why the Colonel sahib shall beg for his Ranjoor Singh," she smiled. "Does the fire burn yet, I wonder?"

She struck a gong, and a maid appeared in the door like an instant echo.

"Does the fire still burn?" she asked.

The maid disappeared and was gone five minutes, during which Kirby and Warrington sat in silent wonder. They wondered chiefly what the regiment would say, if it knew—and whether the regiment would ever know. Then the maid came back.

"It burns," she said. "I can see flame from the roof, though not so much flame."

"So," said Yasmini. "Listen, sahibs."

It is doubtful if a trumpet could have summoned them away, for she had them bound in her spells, and each in a different spell, as her way is. She had little need to order them to listen.

"The talk in the bazaars did little harm, for the fat *bunnias* know well whose rule has given them their pickings. They talk for the love of words, but they trade for the love of money, and the Government protects their money. Nay, it was not the *bunnias* who mattered.

"But there came a day when the rings of talk had reached the hills, and hillmen came to Delhi to hear more, as they ever have come since India was India. And it was clear then to the Government that proof of disloyalty among the native regiments would set the hillman screaming for a holy war—for the hills are cold, sahibs, and the hillmen have cold hearts and are quick to take advantage, even as I am, of others' embarassment. Hillmen have no mercy, Colonel sahib. I was weaned amid the hills."

It seemed to Kirby and Warrington both—for not all their wits were stupified—that she was sparring for time. And then Warrington saw a face reflected in one of the mirrors and nudged Kirby, and Kirby saw it too. They both saw that she was watching it. It was a fat face, and it looked terrified, but the lips did not move and only the eyes had expression. In a moment a curtain seemed to be drawn in front of it, and Yasmini took up her tale.

"And then, sahibs, as I have told already, there came a wind that whistled about war; and it pleased the Government to know which if any of the native regiments had been affected by the talk. So a closer watch was set, then a net was drawn, and Ranjoor Singh ran into the net."

"An antelope might blunder into a net set for a tiger," said Kirby. "I am here to cut him out again."

Yasmini laughed.

"With pistols to shoot the cobras, and sweat to put out flame? Nay, what is there to cut but the dark that closes up again? Sahib, thou shalt *beg* for Ranjoor Singh who struck a hillman in my house, he was so eager to hear treason!"

"Ranjoor Singh's honor and mine are one!" said Colonel Kirby, using a native phrase that admits of no double meaning, and for a second Yasmini stared at him in doubt.

She had heard that phrase used often to express native regard for a native, or for an Englishman, but never before by an Englishman for a native.

"Then, beg for him!" she grinned mischievously. "Aye, I know the tale! It is the eve of war, and he commands a squadron, and there is need of him. Is it not so? Yet, the house that he entered burns. And the hillman's knife is long and keen, sahib! Beg for him!"

Kirby had risen to his feet, and Warrington followed suit. Kirby's self-possession was returning and she must have known it; perhaps she even intended that it should. But she lay curled on the divan, laughing up at him, and perfectly unimpressed by his recovered dignity.

"If he's alive, and you know where he is," said Kirby, "I will pay you your price. Name it!"

"Beg for him! There is no other price. The House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers burns! Beg for him!"

Now the Colonel of a regiment of light cavalry is so little given to beg for things that the word beg has almost lapsed out of his vocabulary, from desuetude.

"I beg you to tell me where he is," he said

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stiffly, and she clapped her hands and laughed with such delight that he blushed to his ears again.

"I have had a prince on his knees to me, and many a priest," she chuckled, "aye, and many a soldier—but never yet a British Colonel sahib. Kneel, and beg!"

"Why—what—what d'ye mean?" demanded Kirby,

"Is his honor not your honor? I have heard it said. Then beg for his honor, Colonel sahib, on your knees—on those stiff British knees—beg for the honor of Ranjoor Singh!"

"D'you mean—d'you mean——?"

"Beg for his honor, and beg for his life, on your knees, Colonel sahib!"

"I could look the other way, sir," whispered Warrington, for the regiment's need was very real.

"Nay, both of you! Ye shall both beg!" said Yasmini, "or Ranjoor Singh shall taste a hillman's mercy. He shall die so dishonored that the regiment shall hang its head in shame!"

"Impossible!" said Kirby. "His honor is as good as mine!"

"Then beg for his and thine—on your knees, Colonel sahib!"

Then it seemed to Colonel Kirby that the room began to swim, for what with the heat and what with an unconquerable dread of snakes, he was not in shape to play his will against this woman's.

"What if I kneel?" he asked,

"I will promise you Ranjoor Singh, alive and clean!"

"When?"

"In time!"

"In time for what?"

"Against the regiment's need!"

"No use. I want him at once!" said Colonel Kirby.

"Then go, sahib! Put out the fire with the sweat that streams from thee! Nay, go, both of you—ye have my leave to go! And what is a Sikh subahdar more or less? Nay, go, and let the Jat die!"

It is not to be written lightly that the British colonel of Outram's own and his adjutant both knelt to a native woman—if she is a native—in a top back-room of a Delhi bazaar. But it has to be recorded that for the sake of Ranjoor Singh they did.

They knelt and placed their foreheads where she bade them, against the divan at her feet, and she poured enough musk in their hair, for the love of mischief, to remind them of what they had done until in the course of slowly moving nature the smell should die away. And then in a second the lights went out, each blown by a fan from behind the silken hangings.

They heard her silvery laugh, and they heard her spring to the floor. In cold, creeping sweat they listened to footsteps, and a little voice whispered in Hindustanee—

"This way, sahibs!"

They followed, since there was nothing else to do and their pride was all gone, to be pushed and pulled by unseen hands and chuckling girls down stairs that were cut out of sheer blackness. And at the foot of the dark, a voice that Warrington recognized shed new interest but no light on the mystery.

"Salaam, sahibs," said a fat babu, backing through a door in front of them and showing himself silhouetted against the lesser outer darkness. "Seeing regimental *rissaldar* on box seat I took liberty. The subahdar-major is sending this by as yet unrewarded messenger, and word to the effect that back way out of burning house was easier than front way in. He sends salaam. I am unrewarded messenger."

He slipped something into Colonel Kirby's hand, and Kirby struck a match to examine it. It was Ranjoor Singh's ring that had the regimental crest engraved on it.

"Not yet rewarded!" said the babu.

CHAPTER VII

Let the strong take the wall of the weak,
(And there's plenty of room in the dust!)
Let the bully be brave, but the meek
No more in the way than he must.
Be crimson and ermine and gold,
Good lying and living and mirth,
(Oh, laugh and be fat!) the reward of the bold,
But the meek shall inherit the earth.

"THAT'S the man whose face was in the mirror!" said Warrington suddenly, reaching out to seize the babu's collar. "He's the man who wanted to be regimental clerk! He's the man who was offering to eat a German a day! No—stand still, and I won't hurt you!"

"Bring him out into the fresh air!" ordered Kirby.

The illimitable sky did not seem big enough just then; four walls could not hold him. Kirby, Colonel of light cavalry, and

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considered by many the soundest man in his profession, was in revolt against himself; and his collar was a beastly mess.

"Hurry out of this hole for Heaven's sake!" he exclaimed.

So Warrington applied a little science to the babu, and that gentleman went out through a narrow door backwards at a speed and at an angle that were new to him—so new that he could not express his sensations in the form of speech. The door shut behind them with a slam, and when they looked for it they could see no more than a mark in the wall about fifty yards from the bigger door by which they had originally entered.

"There's the carriage waiting, sir!" said Warrington, and with a glance toward it to reassure himself, Kirby opened his mouth wide and filled his lungs three times with the fresh, rain-sweetened air.

There were splashes of rain falling, and he stood with bared head, face upward, as if the rain would wash Yasmini's musk from him. It was nearly pitch-dark, but Warrington could see that the *rissaldar* on the box-seat raised his whip in token of recognition.

"Now then! Speak, my friend! What were you doing in there?" demanded Warrington.

"No, not here!" said Kirby. "We might be recognized. Bring him into the shay."

The babu uttered no complaint, but allowed himself to be pushed along at a trot ahead of the adjutant, and bundled headforemost through the carriage door.

"Drive slowly!" ordered Kirby, clambering in last, and the *rissaldar* sent the horses forward at a steady trot.

"Now!" said Warrington.

"H-r-r-r-ump!" said Kirby.

"My God, gentlemen!" said the babu. "Sahibs, I am innocent of all complicitee in this or any other eventuality. I am married man, having family responsibilitee and other handicaps. Therefore——"

"Where did you get this ring?" demanded Kirby.

"That? Oh, that!" said the Babu. "That is veree simplee told. That is simple little matter. There is nothing untoward in that connection. Subahdar-major Ranjoor Singh, who is legal owner of ring, same being his property, gave it into my hand."

"When?"

Both men demanded to know that in one voice.

"Sahibs, having no means of telling time, how can I guess?"

"How long ago? About how long ago?"

"Being elderly person of advancing years and much adipose tissue, I am not able to observe more than one thing at a time. And yet many things have been forced on my attention. I do not know how long ago."

"Since I saw you outside the barrack gate?" demanded Warrington.

"Oh yes. Oh certainly. By all means!"

"Less than two hours ago then, sir!" said Warrington, looking at his watch.

"Then he isn't burned to death!" said Kirby with more satisfaction than he had expressed all evening.

"Oh no, sir! Positivelee not, sahib! The Subahdar-Major is all vitalitee!"

"Where did he give you the ring?"

"Into the palm of my hand, sahib."

"Where—in what place—in what street—at whose house?"

"At nobody's house, sahib. It was in the dark, and the dark is very big."

"Did he give it you at Yasmini's?"

"Oh, no, sahib! Positivelee not!"

"Where is he now?"

"Sahib, how should I know, who am but elderly person of no metaphysical attainments, only failed B. A.?"

"What did he say when he gave it to you?"

"Sahib, he threatened me!"

"Confound you, what did he say?"

"He said, 'Babuji, present this ring to Colonel Kirby sahib with my *bohut salaam*.' He said, moreover, 'You will find him, babuji, where you will find him, but in any case you will lose no time at all in finding him. When you have given the ring to him he will ask you questions, and you will say Ranjoor Singh said, 'All will presently be made clear; and should you forget the message, babuji, or should you fail to find him soon, there are those who will make it their urgent business, babuji, to open that belly of thine and see what is in it!' So, my God, gentlemen! I am veree timid man! I have given the ring and the message, but how will they know that I have given it? I did not think of that! Moreover, I am unrewarded—I have no emolument—as yet!"

"How will *who* know?" demanded Warrington.

"They, sahib?"

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"Who are they?" asked Kirby.

"The men who will investigate the inside of my belly, sahib. Oh, a belly is so sensitive! I am afraid!"

"Did he tell you who 'they' were?"

"No, sahib. Had he done so I would at once have sought police protection. Not knowing names of individuals, what was use of going to police who would laugh at me? I went to Yasmini who understands all things. She laughed too; but she told me where is Colonel Kirby sahib."

COLONEL KIRBY became possessed of a bright idea, his first since Yasmini had thrown her spell over him.

"Could you find the way," he asked, "from here to wherever it was that Subahdar-major Ranjoor Singh gave you that ring?"

The babu thrust his head out of the carriage window, and gazed into the dark for several minutes.

"Conceivablee yes, sahib."

"Then tell the driver where to turn!"

"I could direct with more discernment from box-seat," said the babu, with a hand on the door.

"No you don't!" commanded Warrington. "Let go that handle! What I want to know is why were you so afraid at Yasmini's?"

"I, sahib?"

"Yes, you! I saw your face in a mirror, and you were scared nearly to death. Of what?"

"Who is not afraid of Yasmini? Were the sahibs not also afraid?"

"Of what besides Yasmini were you afraid? Of what in particular?"

"Of her cobras, sahib!"

"What of them?" demanded Warrington with a reminiscent shudder.

"Certain of her women showed them to me."

"Why?"

"To further convince me, sahib, had that been necessary. Oh, but I was already quite convinced. Bravery is not my *vade mecum!*"

"—— the man! To convince you of what?"

"That if I tell too much one of those cobras will shortlee be my bedmate. Ah! To think of it causes me to perspirate with sweat. Sahibs, that is a——"

"You shall go to jail if you don't tell me what I want to know!" said Kirby.

"Ah, sahib, I was jail-clerk once—dismissed for minor offences but cumulative in effect. Being familiar with inside of jail am able to make choice."

"Get on the box-seat with him!" commanded Kirby. "Let him show the driver where to turn. But watch him! Keep hold of him!"

So again the babu was propelled on an involuntary course, and Warrington proceeded to pinch certain of his fat parts to encourage him to mount the box with greater speed; but his helplessness became so obvious that Warrington turned friend and shoved him up at last, keeping hold of his loin-cloth when he wedged his own muscular anatomy into the small space left.

"To the right," said the babu, pointing. And the *rissaldar* drove to the right.

"To the left," said the babu, and Warrington made note of the fact that they were not so very far away from the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers.

Soon the babu began to scratch his stomach.

"What's the matter?" demanded Warrington.

"They said they would cut my belly open, sahib! A belly is *so* sensitive!"

Warrington laughed sympathetically; one could not help but sympathize with the man's fears, for they were genuine and candidly expressed. The babu continued scratching.

"To the right," he said after a while, and the *rissaldar* drove to the right, toward where a Hindu temple cast deep shadows, and a row of trees stood sentry in spasmodic moonlight. In front of the temple, seated on a mat, was a wandering *fakir* of the none-too-holy type. By his side was a flat, covered basket.

"Look, sahib!" said the babu; and Warrington looked.

"My belly crawls!"

"What's the matter, man?"

"He is a *fakir*. There are snakes in that basket—cobras, sahib! Ow-ow-ow!"

Warrington, swaying precariously over the edge, held tight by the loin-cloth, depending on it as a yacht in a tideway would to three hundred pounds of iron.

"Oh, cobras are so veree dreadful creatures!" wailed the babu, caressing his waist

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again. "Look, sahib! Look! Oh, look! Beetween devil and over-sea what should a man do? Ow!"

The carriage lurched at a mud-puddle. The babu's weight lurched with it, and Warrington's center of gravity shifted. The babu seemed to shrug himself away from the snakes, but the effect was to shove Warrington the odd half-inch it needed to put him overside. He clung to the loin-cloth and pulled hard to haul himself back again, and the loin-cloth came away.

"Halt!" yelled Warrington, and the *rissaldar* reined in.

But the horses took fright and plunged forward, though the *rissaldar* swore afterwards that the babu did nothing to them; he supposed it must have been the *fakir* squatting in the shadows that scared them.

And whatever it may have been—snakes or not—that had scared the babu, it had scared all his helplessness away. Naked from shirt to socks, he rolled like a big ball backwards over the carriage top, fell to earth behind the carriage, bumped into Warrington who was struggling to his feet, knocking him down again, and departed for the temple shadows, screaming. The temple door slammed just as Warrington started after him.

BY THAT time the *rissaldar* had got the horses stopped, and Colonel Kirby had realized what happened.

"Come back, Warrington!" he ordered.

Warrington obeyed, but without enthusiasm.

"I can run faster than that fat brute, sir!" he said. "And I saw him go into the temple. We won't find Ranjoor Singh now in a month of Sundays!"

He was trying to wipe the mud from himself with the aid of the loin-cloth.

"Anyhow, I've got the most important part of his costume," he said vindictively. "Gad, I'd like to get him on the run now through the public street!"

"Come along in!" commanded Kirby, opening the door. "There has been trouble enough already, without a charge of temple-breaking. Tell the *rissaldar* to drive back to quarters. I'm going to get this musk out of my hair before dawn!"

Warrington sniffed as he climbed in. The outer night had given him at least a standard by which to judge things.

"I'd give something to listen to the first man who smells the inside of this shay!" he said cheerily. "D'you suppose we can blame it on the babu, sir!"

"We can try!" said Kirby. "Is that his loin-cloth you've got still?"

"Didn't propose to leave it in the road for him to come and find, sir! His present shame is about the only consolation prize we get out of the evening's sport. I wish it smelt of musk—but it don't, it smells of babu—straight babu, undiluted. Hello—what's this?"

He began to untwist a corner of the cloth, holding it up to get a better view of it in the dim light that entered through the window. He produced a piece of paper that had to be untwisted too.

"Got a match, sir?"

Kirby struck one.

"It's addressed to 'Colonel Kirby sahib!' Bet you it's from Ranjoor Singh! Now—d'you suppose that heathen meant to hold on to that until he could get his price for it?"

"Dunno," said Kirby with indifference, opening the note as fast as trembling fingers could unfold it. He would not have admitted to himself what his fingers told so plainly—the extent of his regard for Ranjoor Singh.

The note was short, and Kirby read it aloud, since it was not marked "private," and there was nothing in it that even the babu might not have read.

"To Colonel Kirby sahib, from his obedient servant Subahdar-Major Ranjoor Singh:—Leave of absence being out of question after declaration of war, will Colonel Kirby sahib please put in Order of the Day that Subahdar-Major Ranjoor Singh is assigned to special duty, or words to same effect."

"Is that all?" asked Warrington.

"That's all," said Kirby.

"Suppose it's a forgery?"

"The ring rather proves it isn't, and I've another way of knowing."

"Oh."

"Yes," said Kirby.

They sat in silence in the swaying shay until the smell of musk and the sense of being mystified became too much for Warrington, and he began to hum to himself. Humming brought about a return to his usual wide-awakefulness, and he began to notice things.

"Shay rides like a gun," he said suddenly.

Kirby grunted.

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"All weight behind and jump in front. Front wheels don't seem to me to more than grip the ground!"

His head was out of the window to investigate a moment later, but Kirby ordered him to sit still.

"Want to be recognized?" he demanded. "Keep your head inside, you young ass!"

So Warrington sat back against the cushions until the guard at the barrack gate turned out to present arms to the *rissaldar's* raised whip. As if he understood the requirements of the occasion without being told, the *rissaldar* sent the horses up the drive at a hard gallop. It was rather more than half-way up the drive that Warrington spoke again.

"Feel that, sir?" he asked.

"I ordered that place seen to yesterday!" growled Kirby. "Why wasn't it done?"

"It was, sir."

"How was it that we bumped there, then?"

"Why aren't we running like a gun any longer?" wondered Warrington. "Felt to me as if we'd dropped a load."

"Well, here we are, thank God! What do you mean to do?"

"Rounds," said Warrington.

"Very well."

Kirby dived through his door, while Warrington went behind the shay to have a good look for causes. He could find none, although a black leather apron, usually rolled up behind in order to be strapped over baggage when required, was missing.

"Didn't see who took that apron, did you?" he asked the *rissaldar*, but the *rissaldar* had not known that it was gone.

"All right then, and thank you!" said Warrington, walking off into the darkness bareheaded, to help the smell evaporate from his hair; and the shay rumbled away to its appointed place, with the babu's loincloth inside it on the front seat.

It need surprise nobody that Colonel Kirby found time first to go to his bathroom. His regiment was as ready for active service at any minute as a fire-engine should be (for in that particular, India's speed is as three to Prussia's one). The moment orders to march should come, he would parade it in full marching order and lead it away. But there were no orders yet; he had merely had warning.

So he sent for dog soap and a brush and proceeded to scour his head. After twenty minutes of it, and ten changes of water, when he felt that he dared face his own servant without blushing, he made that wondering Sikh take turns at shampooing him until he could endure the friction no longer.

"What does my head smell of now?" he demanded.

"Musk, sahib!"

"Not of dog soap?"

"No, sahib!"

"Bring that carbolic disinfectant here!"

The servant obeyed, and Kirby mixed a lotion that would outsmell most things. He laved his head in it generously, and washed it off sparingly.

"Bring me brown paper!" he ordered then; and again the wide-eyed Sikh obeyed.

Kirby rolled the paper into torches, and giving the servant one proceeded to fumigate the room and his own person until not even a bloodhound could have tracked him back to Yasmini's, and the reek of musk had been temporarily at least subdued into quiescence.

"Go and ask Major Brammle to come and see me," said Kirby then.

BRAMMLE came in sniffing, and Kirby cursed him through tight lips, with words that were no less fervent for lack of being heard.

"Hello! Burning love letters? The whole mess is doin' the same thing. Haven't had time to burn mine yet—was busy sorting things over when you called. Look here!"

He opened the front of his mess-jacket and produced a little lace handkerchief, a glove, and a powder-puff.

"Smell 'em!" he said. "Patchouli! Shame to burn 'em, what? S'pose I must, though."

"Anything happen while I was gone?" asked Kirby.

"Yes. Most extraordinary thing. You know that a few hours ago D Squadron were all sitting about in groups looking miserable? We set it down to their trooper being murdered and another man being missing. Well, just about the time you and Warrington drove off in the mess shay, they all bucked up and began grinning! Wouldn't say a word. Just grinned, and became the perkiest squadron of the lot!

"Now they're all sleeping like two-year-olds. Reason? Not a word of a reason!

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I saw young Warrington just now on his way to their quarters with a lantern, and if he can find any of 'em awake, perhaps he can get the truth out of em, for they'll talk to him when they won't to anybody else. By the way, Warrington can't have come in with you, did he?"

Kirby ignored the question.

"Did you tell Warrington to go and ask them?" he demanded.

"Yes. Passed him in the dark, but did not recognize him by the smell. No—no! Got as near him as I could, and then leaned up against the scent to have a word with him! Musk! Never smelt anything like it in my life! Talk about girls! He must be in love with half India, and native at that! Brazen-faced young monkey! I asked him where he got the disinfectant, and he told me he fell into a mud-puddle!"

"Perhaps he did," said Kirby. "Was there mud on him?"

"Couldn't see. Didn't dare get so near him! Don't you think he ought to be spoken to? I mean, the eve of war's the eve of war and all that kind of thing, but——"

"I wish you'd let me see the Orders of the Day," Kirby interrupted. "I want to make an addition to them."

"I'll send an orderly."

"Wish you would."

Five minutes later Kirby sat at his private desk while Brammle puffed at a cigar by the window. Kirby, after a lot of thinking, wrote—

Subahdar-Major Ranjoor Singh (D Squadron,) assigned to special duty.

He handed the orders back to Brammle, and the Major eyed the addition with subdued amazement.

"What'll D Squadron say?" he wondered.

"Remains to be seen," said Kirby.

Outside in the muggy blackness that shuts down on India in the rains, Warrington walked alone, swinging a lantern and chuckling to himself as he reflected what D Squadron would be likely to invent as a reason for the smell that walked with him. For he meant to wake D Squadron and learn things.

But all at once it occurred to him that he had left the babu's loin-cloth on the inside front seat of the shay; and, because if that were seen there it would have given excuse for a thousand tales too many and too imaginative, he hurried in search of it, taking a short cut to where by that time the shay should be. On his way, close to his destination, he stumbled over something soft, that tripped him. He stooped, swung the lantern forward, and picked up—the missing leather apron from behind the shay.

The foot-path on which he stood was about a yard wide; the shay could not possibly have come along it. And it certainly had been behind the shay when they left barracks. Moreover, close examination proved it to be the identical apron beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Warrington began to hum to himself. And then he ceased from humming. Then he set the lantern down and stepped away from it sideways, until its light no longer shone on him. He listened, as a dog does, with intelligence and skill. Then, suddenly, he sprang and lit on a bulky mass that yielded—gasped—spluttered—did anything but yell.

"SO YOU rode on the luggage-rack behind the carriage, did you, babuji?" he smiled. "And curled under the apron to look like luggage when we passed the guard, eh?"

"But, my God, sahib!" said a plaintive voice. "Should I walk through Delhi naked? You, who wear pants, you laugh at me, but I assure you, sahib——"

"Hush!" ordered Warrington; and the babu seemed very glad to hush.

"There was a note in a corner of that cloth of yours!"

"And the sahib found it? Oh, then I am relieved. I am preserved from pangs of mutual regret!"

"Why didn't you give that note to Colonel Kirby sahib, when you had the chance? Eh?" asked Warrington, keeping firm hold of him.

"Sahib! Your honor! Not being yet remunerated on account of ring and verbal message duly delivered, commercial precedent was all on my side that I should retain further article of value pending settlement. Now, I ask you——"

"Where was Ranjoor Singh, when he gave you that ring and message?" demanded Warrington sternly, increasing his grip on the babu's fat arm.

"Sahib, when I have received payment for first service rendered, my disposition

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may be changed. I am as yet in condition of *forma pauperis*."

Still holding him tight, Warrington produced twenty rupees in paper money.

"Can you see those, babuji? See them? Then, earn them!"

"Oh my God, sahib, I have positively earned a *lakh* of rupees this night already!"

"Where was Ranjoor Singh when he——"

Footsteps were approaching—undoubtedly of a guard on its way to investigate. The babu seemed to sense Warrington's impatience.

"Sahib," he said. "I am very meek person, having family of wife and children all dependent. Is that rupees twenty? I would graciously accept same, and positivelee hold my tongue!"

The steps came nearer.

"I was on my way to D Squadron quarters, sahib, to narrate story and pass begging bowl. Total price of story rupees twenty. Or else, the sahib may deliver me to guard, and guard shall be regaled free gratis with full account of evening's amusement? Yes?"

The steps came nearer yet. Recognizing an officer, the men halted a few paces away.

"Sahib, for sum of rupees twenty I could hold tongue for twenty years, unless in meantime deceased, in which case——"

"Take 'em!" ordered Warrington, and the babu's fingers shut tight on the money.

"Guard!" ordered Warrington. "Put this babu out into the street!"

"Good night, sahib!" said the babu. "Kindlee present my serious respects to the Colonel sahib. Salaam, sahib!"

But Warrington had gone into the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

The Four Winds come, the Four Winds go,
(Ye wise o' the world, oh listen ye!)
Whispering, whistling what they know,
Wise, since wandering made them so,
(Ye stay-at-homes, oh listen ye!)
Ever they seek and sift and pry—
Listening here, and hurrying by—
Restless, ceaseless—know ye why?
(Then, wise o' the world, oh listen ye!)
The goal of the search of the hurrying wind
Is the key to the maze of a woman's mind,
(And there is no key! Oh, listen ye!)

Yasmini's Song.

SO IN a darkness that grew blacker every minute, Warrington swung his lantern and found his way toward D squadron's quarters. He felt rather pleased with himself. From his own point of view he would have rather enjoyed to have a story anent himself and Yasmini go the round of barracks—with modifications of course, and the kneeling part left out—but he realized that it would not do at all to have Colonel Kirby's name involved in anything of the sort, and he rather flattered himself on his tact in bribing the babu, or being blackmailed by him.

"Got to admit that babu's quite a huntsman!" he told himself, beginning to hum. "One day, if the war don't account for me, I'll come back and take a fall out of that babu. Hello—what's that? Who in thunder—who's waking up the horses at this unearthly hour? Sick horse, I suppose. Why don't they get him out and let the others sleep?"

He began to hurry. A light in stables close to midnight was not to be accounted for on any other supposition than an accident or serious emergency, and if there were either, it was his affair as adjutant to know all the facts at once.

"What's going on in there?" he shouted in a voice of authority while he was yet twenty yards away.

But there was no answer. He could hear a horse plunge, but nothing more.

"Um-m-m! Horse cast himself!" he straightway decided.

But there was no cast horse, as he was aware the moment he had looked down both long lines of sleepy brutes that whickered their protest against interrupted sleep. At the far end he could see that two men labored, and a big horse fiercely resented their unseasonable attentions to himself. He walked down the length of the stable, and presently recognized Bagh, Ranjoor Singh's charger.

"What are you grooming him for at this hour?" he demanded.

"It is an order, sahib," came the unexpected reply.

"Whose order?"

"Ranjoor Singh sahib's order."

"The —— it is! When did the order come?"

"But now?"

"Who brought it?"

"A babu, with a leather apron."

Warrington walked away ten paces in order to get command of himself, and pinch himself, and make quite sure he was awake.

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"A fat babu?" he asked, walking back again.

"Very fat," said one of the two troopers, continuing to brush the resentful charger.

"So he delivered his message first, and then went to hunt for his loin-cloth!" mused Warrington. "And he had enough intuition, and guts enough, to look for it first in the shay! I'm beginning to admire that man!" Aloud he asked the trooper, "What was the wording of the subahdar-major sahib's message?"

"'Let Bagh be well groomed and held ready against all contingencies!'" said the trooper.

"Then, take him outside!" ordered Warrington. "Groom him where you won't disturb the other horses! How often have you got to be told that a horse needs sleep as much as a man does? The squadron won't be fit to march a mile if you keep 'em awake all night! Lead him out quietly, now! Whoa, you brute! Now—take him out and keep him out—put him in the end stall in my stable when you've finished him— d'you hear?"

He flattered himself again. With all these mysterious messages and orders coming in from nowhere, he told himself it would be good to know at all times where Ranjoor Singh's charger was, as well as a service to Ranjoor Singh to stable the brute comfortably. He told himself that was a very smart move, and one for which Ranjoor Singh would some day thank him, provided of course that . . . .

"Provided what?" he wondered half aloud. "Smells to me as if Ranjoor Singh has got himself into some kind of a scrape, and hopes to get out of it by the back-door route and no questions asked! Well, let's hope he gets out! Let's hope there'll be no court martial nastiness! Let's hope—oh, —— just hoping! Ranjoor Singh's a better man than I am. Here's believing in him! Here's to him, thick or thin! Forward—walk—march!"

He turned out the guard, and the particular troop sergeant with whom he wished to speak not being on duty, he ordered him called. And ten minutes later the sergeant came, still yawning, from his cot.

"Come over here, Arjan Singh," he called, thinking fast and furiously as he led the way.

If he made one false move, or aroused one suspicion in the sergeant's mind, he was likely to learn less than nothing; but if he did not appear to know at least something, he would probably learn nothing either.

As he turned, at a distance from the guard-room light, to face the sergeant, though not to meet his eyes too keenly, the fact that would not keep out of his brain was that the fat babu had been out in the road, offering to eat Germans, a little while before he and the Colonel had started out that evening. And according to what Brammle had told him when they met near the Colonel's quarters, it was very shortly after that that the squadron came out of its gloom.

"WHAT was the first message that the babu brought this evening?" he asked, still being very careful not to look into the Sergeant's eyes. He spoke as comrade to comrade—servant of the "Salt" to servant of the "Salt."

"Which babu, sahib?" asked Arjan Singh, unblinking.

Now, in all probability, this man—since he had been asleep—knew nothing about the message to groom Bagh. To have answered, "the babu who spoke about the charger," might have been a serious mistake.

"Arjan Singh, look me in the eyes!" he ordered, and the Sikh obeyed. He was taller than Warrington, and looked down on him.

"Are you a true friend of the subahdar-major?"

"May I die, sahib, if I am not!"

"And I? What of me? Am I his friend or his enemy?"

The sergeant hesitated.

"Can I read men's hearts?" he asked.

"Yes!" said Warrington. "And so can I. That is why I had you called from your sleep. I sent for you to learn the truth. What was the message given by the fat babu to one of the guard by the outer gate this evening, and delivered by him or by some other man to D Squadron?"

"Sahib, it was not a written message."

"Repeat it to me."

"Sahib, it was verbal. I can not remember it."

"Arjan Singh, you lie! Did I ever lie to you? Did I ever threaten you and not carry out my threats—promise you and not keep my promise? I am a soldier! Are you a cur?"

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"God forbid, sahib! I——"

"Arjan Singh! Repeat that message to me word for word, please, not as a favor, nor as obeying an order, but as a friend of Ranjoor Singh to a friend of Ranjoor Singh!"

"The message was to the squadron, not to me, sahib."

"Are you not of the squadron?"

"Make it an order, sahib!"

"Certainly not—nor a favor either!"

"Sahib, I——"

"Nor will I threaten you! I guarantee you absolute immunity, if you refuse to repeat it. My word on it! I am Ranjoor Singh's friend, and I ask of his friend!"

"The babu said: 'Says Ranjoor Singh, "Let the squadron be on its best behavior! Let the squadron know that surely before the blood runs he will be there to lead it, wherever it is! Meanwhile, let the squadron be worthy of its salt, and of its officers!"

"Was that all?" asked Warrington.

"All, sahib. May my tongue rot, if I lie!"

"Thank you, Arjan Singh. That's all. You needn't mention our conversation. Good night."

"Fooled!" chuckled Warrington. "She's fooled us to the limit of our special bent, and I take it that's stiff-neckedness!"

He hurried away toward Colonel Kirby's quarters, swinging his lantern and humming to himself.

"And this isn't the Arabian Nights!" he told himself. "It's Delhi—twentieth century A. D.! Gad! Wouldn't the whole confounded army rock with laughter!"

Then he stopped chuckling, to hurry faster, for a giant horn had rooted chunks out of the blackness by the barrack gate, and now what sounded like a racing car was tearing up the drive. The headlights dazzled him, but he ran and reached the Colonel's porch breathless. He was admitted at once, and found the Colonel and Brammle together, facing an aide-de-camp. In the colonel's hand was a medium-sized, sealed envelope.

"Shall I repeat it, sir?" asked the aide-de-camp.

"If you want to," answered Kirby.

"The sealed orders are not to be opened until out at sea. You are expected to parade at dawn, the day after tomorrow, and there will be somebody from headquarters to act as guide for the occasion. In fact, you will be guided at each point until it is time to open your orders. No explanations will be given about anything until later on. That's all. Good night, sir—and good luck!"

The Aide-de-camp held out his hand, and Colonel Kirby shook it a trifle perfunctorily—he was not much given to display of sentiment. The aide-de-camp saluted, and a minute later the giant car spurned the gravel out from under its rear wheels, as it started off to warn another regiment.

"So, we've got our route!" said Kirby.

"And, thank God, we take our own horses!" said Brammle fervently.

"Bet you a thousand the other end's Marseilles!" said Warrington. "We're in luck. They'd have mounted us on bush-horses if we hadn't brought our own; we'd have had to ring a bell to start and stop a squadron. Who wouldn't be light cavalry?"

Kirby put the sealed letter in an inside pocket.

"I'm going to sleep," said Brammle, yawning. "Night, sir!"

"Night!" said Kirby, but Warrington stayed on. He went and stood near the window, and when Kirby had seen Brammle to the door he joined him there.

"What now, Warrington?"

"Caught 'em grooming Ranjoor Singh's charger in the dark!"

"Why?"

"Said it was an order from Ranjoor Singh!"

"I'm getting tired of this. I don't know what to make of it."

"That isn't nearly the worst, sir. Listen to this! Long before Yasmini promised us—before we—knelt to save his life and honor—Ranjoor Singh had sent a message to his squadron, guaranteein' to be with 'em before the blood runs! Specific guarantee, and no conditions!"

"Then——"

"Exactly, sir!"

"She fooled us, eh?"

"D'you suppose she's for or against the Government, sir?"

"I don't know. Thank God we've got our marching orders! Go and wash your head! And Warrington—hold your tongue!

Warrington held up his right hand.

"So help me, sir!" he grinned. "But, will she hold hers?"

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CHAPTER IX

Westward, into the hungry West,
(Oh, listen, wise men, listen ye!)
Whirls the East wind on his quest,
Whimpering, worrying, hurrying, lest
The light o'ertake him. Listen ye!
Mark ye the burden of his sigh:
"Westward sinks the sun to die!
Westward wing the vultures!"—Aye,
(Listen, wise men, listen ye!)
The East must lose—the West must gain,
For none come back to the East again,
Though widows call them! Listen ye!
Yasmini's Song.

NOW, India is unlike every other country in the world in all particulars, and Delhi is in some respects the very heart through which India's unusualness flows. Delhi has five railway-stations with which to cope with latter-day floods of paradoxical necessity; and nobody knew from which railway-station troops might be expected to entrain, or whither, although Delhi knew that there was war.

There did not seem to be anything very much out of the ordinary at any of the stations. In India, one or two sidings are nearly always full of empty trains; there did not seem to be more of them than usual.

At the British barracks there was more or less commotion, because Thomas Atkins likes to voice his joy when the long peace breaks at last and he may justify himself; but in the native lines, where dignity is differently understood, the only men who seemed unusually busy were the farriers, and the armorers who sharpened swords.

The Government offices appeared to be undisturbed, and certainly no more messengers ran about than usual; the only difference was that one or two of them were open at a very early hour. But even in them—and Englishmen were busy in them—there seemed no excitement. Delhi had found time in a night to catch her breath and continue listening; for unlike most big cities that brag with or without good reason, Delhi is listening nearly all the time.

A man was listening in the dingiest of all the offices on the ground floor of a big building, on the side away from the street—a man in a drab-silk suit, who twisted a leather watch-guard around his thumb and untwisted it incessantly. There was a telephone beside him, and a fair-sized pile of telegraph blanks, but beyond that not much to show what his particular business might be. He did not look aggressive, but he seemed nervous, for he jumped perceptibly when the telephone-bell rang; and being a Government telephone, with no commercial aims, it did not ring loud.

"Yes," he said, with the receiver at his ear. "Yes, yes. Who else? Oh, I forgot for the moment. 43,292. Give yours! Very well, I'm listening."

Whoever was speaking at the other end had a lot to say, and none of it can have been expected, for the man in the drab-silk suit twisted his wrinkled face and worked his eyes in a hundred expressions that began with displeasure and passed through different stages of surprise to acquiescence.

"I want you to know," he said, "that I got my information at first hand. I got it from Yasmini herself, from three of the hillmen who were present, and from the Afridi who was kicked and beaten. All except the Afridi, who wasn't there by that time, agreed that Ranjoor Singh had words with the German afterwards. Eh? What's that?"

He listened again for about five minutes and then hung up the receiver with an expression of mixed irritation and amusement.

"Caught me hopping on the wrong leg this time!" he muttered, beginning to twist at his watch-guard again.

Presently he sat up and looked bored, for he heard the fast trot of a big, long-striding horse. A minute later a high dog-cart drew up in the street, and he heard a man's long-striding footsteps coming around the corner.

"LIKE horse, like man, like regiment!" he muttered. "Pick his stride or his horse's out of a hundred, and—" he pulled out his nickel watch —"he's ten minutes earlier than I expected him! Morning, Colonel Kirby!" he said pleasantly, as Kirby strode in, helmet in hand. "Take a seat."

He noticed at once that Kirby's scalp was red, and that he smelt more than faintly of carbolic.

"Morning!" said Kirby.

"I'm wondering what's brought you," said the man in drab.

"I've come about Ranjoor Singh," said Kirby, and the man in drab tried to look surprised.

"What about him? Reconsidered yesterday's decision?"

"No," said Kirby. "I've come to ask what news you have of him." And Kirby's

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eye, that some men seemed to think so like a bird's, transfixed the man in drab, so that he squirmed as if he had been impaled.

"You must understand, Colonel Kirby—in fact I'm sure you do understand—that my business doesn't admit of confidences. Even if I wanted to divulge information, I'm not allowed to. I stretched a point yesterday when I confided in you my suspicions regarding Ranjoor Singh, but that doesn't imply that I'm going to tell you all I know. I asked you what *you* knew, you may remember."

"I told you!" snapped Kirby. "Is Ranjoor Singh still under suspicion?"

That was a straight question of the true Kirby type, that admitted of no evasion, and the man in drab pulled his watch out, knocking it on the desk absent-mindedly, as if it were an egg that he wished to crack. He must either answer or not it seemed, so he did neither.

"Why do you ask?" he parried.

"I've a right to know! Ranjoor Singh's my wing commander, and a better officer or a more loyal gentleman doesn't exist. I want him! I want to know where he is! And if he's under a cloud I want to know why! Where is he?"

"I don't know where he is," said the man in drab. "Is he—ah—absent without leave?"

"Certainly not!" said Kirby. "I've seen to that!"

"Then you've communicated with him?"

"No."

"Then if his regiment were to march without him——"

"It won't if I can help it!" said Kirby.

"And if you can't help it, Colonel Kirby?"

"In that case he has got what he asked for, and there can be no charge against him until he shows up."

"I understand you have your marching orders?"

"I have sealed orders!" snapped Kirby.

"To be opened at sea?"

"To be opened when I see fit!"

"Oh!"

"Yes," said Kirby. "I asked you is Ranjoor Singh still under suspicion!"

"My good sir, I am not the arbiter of Ranjoor Singh's destiny! How should I know?"

"I intend to know!" vowed Kirby rising.

"I'm prepared to state that Ranjoor Singh is not in danger of arrest. I don't see that you have right to ask more than that, Colonel Kirby. Martial law has been declared this morning, and things don't take their ordinary course any longer, you know."

Kirby paced once across the office floor, and once back again. Then he faced the man in drab as a duellist faces his antagonist.

"I don't like to go over men's heads," he said, "as you threatened to do to me, for instance, yesterday. If you will give me satisfactory assurance that Ranjoor Singh is being treated as a loyal officer should be, I will ask no more. If not, I shall go now to the general commanding. As you say there's martial law now, he's the man to see."

"Colonel Kirby," said the man in drab, twisting at his watch-guard furiously, "if you'll tell me what's in your sealed orders—open them and see—I'll tell you what I know about Ranjoor Singh, and we'll call it a bargain!"

"I wasn't joking," said Kirby, turning red as his scalp, from the roots of his hair to his collar.

"I'm in deadly earnest!" said the man in drab.

So without a word more Colonel Kirby hurried out again, carrying his saber in his left hand at an angle that was peculiar to him, and that illustrated determination better than words could have done.

His huge horse plunged away almost before he had gained the seat, and, saber and all, he gained the seat at a step-and-a-jump. But the *sais* was not up behind, and Kirby had scarcely settled down to drive before the man in drab had the telephone mouthpiece to his lips, and had given his mysterious number again—43,292.

"He's coming, sir!" he said curtly.

Somebody at the other end apparently asked "Who is coming?" for the man in drab answered.

"Kirby."

FIVE minutes later Kirby caught a general at breakfast, and was received with courtesy and feigned surprise.

"D'you happen to know anything about my Subahdar-Major, Ranjoor Singh?" asked Kirby, after a hasty apology for bursting in.

"Why?"

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"He was under suspicion yesterday—I was told so. Next he disappeared. Then I received a message from him asking me to assign him to special duty; that was after I'd more than half believed him burned to death in a place called 'the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers.' He has sent some most extraordinary messages to his squadron by the hand of a mysterious babu, but not a word of explanation of any kind. Can you tell me anything about him, sir?"

"Wasn't a trooper of yours murdered yesterday?" the General asked.

"Yes," said Kirby.

"And another missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Ranjoor Singh go off to search for the missing man?"

"I was told so."

"H-rrrrr-ump! Well, I'm glad you came; you've saved me trouble! Did you put Ranjoor Singh in Orders as assigned to special duty?"

"Yes."

"What is the missing trooper's name?"

"Jagut Singh."

"Well, will you please enter him in Orders, too?"

"Special service?"

"Special service," said the General. "How about Ranjoor Singh's charger?"

"I understand that he's been kept well-groomed by Ranjoor Singh's orders, and my adjutant tells me he has the horse in care in his own stable."

The General made a note.

"Whose stable?" he asked.

"Warrington's."

"Warrington, of Outram's Own, eh? Captain Warrington."

The General wrote that down, while Kirby watched him, bewildered.

"Well now, Kirby, that'll be all right. Have the horse left there, will you. I hope you've been able to dispose of your own horses to advantage. Two chargers don't seem a large allowance for a commanding officer of a cavalry regiment, but that's all you can take with you. You'll have to leave the rest behind."

"Haven't given it a thought, sir! Too busy thinking about Ranjoor Singh. Worried about him."

"Shouldn't worry!" said the General. "Ranjoor Singh's all right."

"That's the first assurance I've had of it, except by way of a mysterious note," said Kirby.

"By all right, I mean that he isn't in disgrace. But now about your horses and private effects. You've done nothing about them?"

"I'll have time to attend to that this afternoon, sir."

"Oh, no you won't. That's why I'm glad you came! These—" he gave him a sealed envelope—"are supplementary orders, to be opened when you get back to barracks. I want you out of the way by noon if possible. We'll send a man down this morning to take charge of whatever any of you want kept, and you'd better tell him to sell the rest and pay the money to your bankers; he'll be a responsible officer. That's all. Good-by, Kirby, and good luck!"

The General held out his hand.

"One more minute, sir," said Kirby. "About Ranjoor Singh!"

"What about him?"

"Well, sir—what about him?"

"What have you heard?"

"That—I've heard a sort of promise that he'll be with his squadron, to lead it, before the blood runs."

"Won't that be time enough?" asked the General smiling. He was looking at Kirby very closely. "Not sick are you?" he asked. "No? I thought your scalp looked rather redder than usual."

Kirby flushed to the top of his collar instantly, and the General pretended to arrange a sheaf of papers on the table.

"One reason why you're being sent first, my boy," said the General, holding out his hand again, "is that you and your regiment are fittest to be sent. But I've taken into consideration, too, that I don't want you or your adjutant killed by a cobra in any event. And—*snf*—*snf*—the salt-sea air gets rid of the smell of musk quicker than anything. Good-by, Kirby, my boy, and God bless you!"

"Good-by, sir!"

Kirby stammered the words, and almost ran down the steps to his waiting dog-cart. As all good men do, when undeserved ridicule or blame falls to their lot, he wondered what in the world he could have done wrong. He had no blame for anybody, only a fierce resentment of injustice—an almost savage sense of shame that any one should know about the adventure of the night before, and a rising sense of joy in his soldier's heart

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because he had orders in his pocket to be up and doing. So, and only so, could he forget it all.

He whipped up his horse and went down the General's drive at a pace that made the British sentry at the gate grin from ear to ear with whole-souled approval. He did not see a fat babu approach the General's bungalow from the direction of the bazaar. The babu salaamed profoundly, but Kirby's eyes were fixed on the road ahead, and his thoughts were already deep in the future. He saw nothing except the road, until he took the last corner into barracks on one wheel, and drew up a minute later in front of the bachelor quarters that had sheltered him for the past four years.

"PACK! Campaign kit! One trunk!" he ordered his servant. "Orderly!"

An orderly ran in from outside.

"Tell Major Brammle and Captain Warrington to come to me!"

It took ten minutes to find Warrington, since every job was his, and nearly every responsibility, until his Colonel should take charge of a paraded, perfect regiment, and lead it away to its fate. He came at last at a run, and Brammle with him.

"Orders changed!" said Kirby. "March at noon! Man'll be here this morning to take charge of officers' effects. Better have things ready for him and full instructions. One trunk allowed each officer. Two chargers."

"Destination, sir?" asked Brammle.

"Not disclosed!"

"Where do we entrain?" asked Warrington.

"We march out of Delhi. Entrain later, at a place appointed on the road."

Warrington began to hum to himself, and to be utterly, consciously happy.

"Then I'll get a move on!" he said starting to hurry out. "Everything's ready, but——"

"Wait a minute!" commanded Kirby; and Warrington remained in the room after Brammle had left it.

"You haven't said anything to anybody, of course, about that incident last night?"

"No, sir."

"Then, *she* has!"

Warrington whistled.

"Are you sure she has?"

"Quite. I've just had proof of it!"

"Makes a fellow reverence the sex!" swore Warrington.

"It'll be forgotten by the time we're back in India," said Kirby solemnly. "Remember to keep absolutely silent about it. The best way to help others forget it, is to forget it yourself. Not one word now to anybody, even under provocation!"

"Not a word, sir!"

"All right. Go and attend to business!"

What "attending to business" meant nobody may guess who has not been in at the breaking up of quarters at short notice. Everything was ready, as Warrington had boasted, but even an automobile may "stall" for a time in the hands of the best chauffeur, and a regiment contains as many separate human equations as it has men in its ranks.

The amount of personal possessions that had to be jettisoned, or left to the tender mercies of a perfunctory agent, would have wrung groans from any one but soldiers. The last minute details that seemed to be nobody's job, and that therefore all fell to Warrington because somebody had to see to them, were beyond the imagination of any but an adjutant, and not even Warrington's imagination proved quite equal to the task.

"We're ready, sir!" he reported at last to Kirby. "We're paraded and waiting. Brammle's inspected 'em, and I've done ditto. There are only thirteen thousand details left undone that I can't think of, and not one of 'em's important enough to keep us waitin'!"

So Kirby rode out on parade and took the regiment's salute. They gave it him in silence; and if he dwelt a second longer on the return salute than a colonel usually does, some slight emotion may be forgiven him. The most emotionless, or rather the man least given to betray emotion, may probably feel solemn when the fate he has worked hard for, summons him at last to lead picked men of another race to the scene of the greatest war in history—when he meets the eyes of those men and knows that they will trust him to the end.

There was nobody to see them off. There were not even women to wail by the barrack gate, for they marched away at dinner-time and official lies had been distributed where they would do most good.

Englishman and Sikh alike rode untormented by the wails or waving farewells of

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their kindred; and there was only a civilian on a white pony, somewhere along ahead, who seemed to know that they were more than just parading. He led them toward the Ajmere Gate, and by the time that the regiment's luggage came along in wagons, with the little rear-guard last of all, it was too late to run and warn people. Outram's Own had gone at high noon and nobody the wiser!

There was no music as they marched, and no talking. Only the jingling bits and rattling hoofs proclaimed that India's best were riding on a sudden summons to fight for the "Salt." They marched in the direction least expected of them, three-quarters of a day before their scheduled time, and even "Guppy," the mess bull-terrier, who ran under the wagon with the officers' luggage, behaved as if all ends of the world were one to him. He waved his tail with dignity and trotted in content.

HARD by the Ajmere Gate they halted, for some bullock carts had claimed their centuries-long prerogative of getting in the way. While the bullocks, to much tail-twisting and objurgation, labored in the mud in every direction but the right one, Colonel Kirby sat his charger almost underneath the gate, waiting patiently. Then the advance-guard clattered off and he led along.

He never knew where it came from and he never tried to guess. He caught it instinctively, and kept it for the sake of chivalry, or perhaps because she had made him think for a moment of his mother. At all events the bunch of jasmine flowers that fell into his lap found a warm berth under his buttoned tunic, and he rode on through the great gate with a kinder thought for Yasmini than probably she would guess.

With that resentment gone, he could ride now as suited him, with all his thoughts ahead, and there lacked then only one thing to complete his pleasure—he missed Ranjoor Singh.

It is not easy for a Sikh to rise to the rank of Major and lead a squadron for the Raj. An English officer had taken Ranjoor Singh's place. It was not that the squadron would lack good leading. It was the man he missed—the decent, loyal gentleman who had worked untiringly to sweat a squadron into shape to Kirby's liking and never once presumed, nor had taken offense at criticism—the man who had been good enough to understand the ethics of an alien Colonel, and to translate them for the benefit of his command.

He counted Ranjoor Singh his friend; and he knew that Ranjoor Singh would have given all the rest of his life to ride away now for only one encounter on a foreign battlefield. Nothing, nothing less than the word of Ranjoor Singh himself, would ever convince him of the man's disloyalty. And he would have felt better if he could have shaken hands with Ranjoor Singh before going, since it seemed to be the order of the day that the Sikh should stay behind.

It did not seem quite the thing to be riding away to war with the best native officer in all India somewhere in Delhi on "special service"—whatever that might be.

He was given as a rule to smiling at any man who did his best. On any other day he would have very likely exchanged a joke with the bullock-man who labored so unavailingly to get the road cleared in a hurry. But today, since his thoughts were of Ranjoor Singh, he paid the man no attention; he had not even formed a mental picture of him by the time he passed the gate.

It was Warrington, cantering up from behind ten minutes or so later, who changed the color of the earth and sky.

"Did you recognize him, sir?"

"Whom?"

"Ranjoor Singh!"

"No! Where?"

"Not the bullock-man who blocked the road, but the man who ran out from behind the gate and straightened things out again. That man was Ranjoor Singh in *mufti!*"

"What makes you think so?"

"I recognized him. So did his squadron —look at them! They're riding like new men!"

Kirby looked, and there was no doubt about D Squadron.

"Is he there yet?" he asked.

"I can see a man standing there—see him? Fellow in white between two bullock carts?"

Kirby pulled out to the roadside and let the regiment pass him. Then he cantered back. The man between the bullock-carts had his back turned and was gazing toward Delhi under his hand.

"Ranjoor Singh!" said Kirby, reining suddenly. "Is that you?"

"Uh?" said the man, facing about. He

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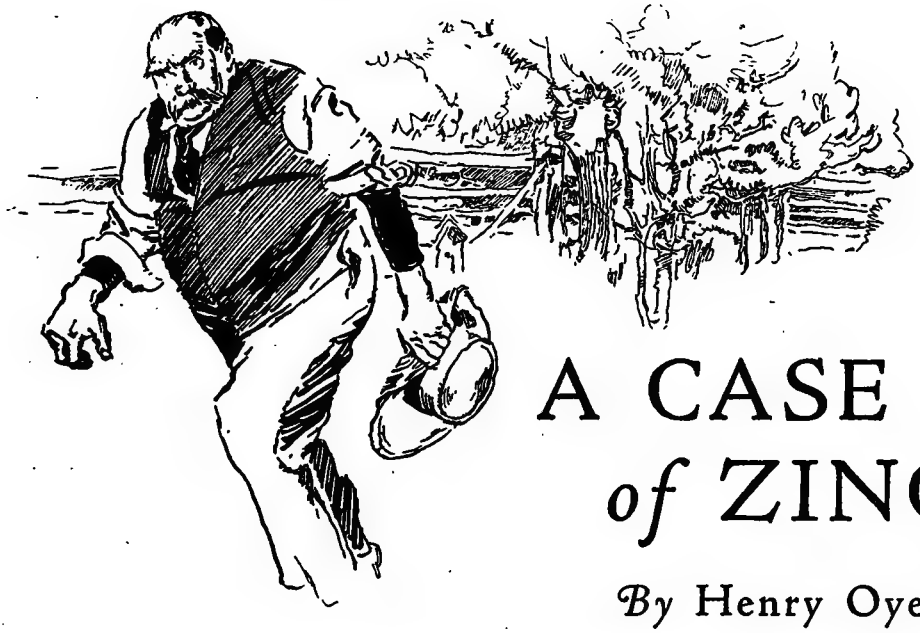
was no more Ranjoor Singh than he was Colonel Kirby.

"Where is the man who came from behind the gate to clear the road?"

The man pointed toward the gate. Inside the gloom of the gate itself Kirby was certain that he saw a Sikh who stood at salute. He cantered to the gate, for he would have given a year's pay for word with Ranjoor Singh. But when he reached the gate the man had gone.

"And he promised he'd be there to lead his squadron before the blood runs!" wondered Kirby.

TO BE CONCLUDED.



A CASE of ZINC

By Henry Oyen

Author of "The Snow Burner," "The Man-Trail," etc.

IN THE days of his youth, before joining the force, Desk-Sergeant Nelson, of Lawnwood Station, had been a cornice-maker. It had been a long time ago. None of his brother officers, none of his fellow citizens in the suburb of Lawnwood, not even his wife, suspected it. He had quit the trade after a difference with his foreman.

The foreman had attacked with a pair of heavy tin shears. Nelson had responded with the only effective weapon that happened to be convenient to his hand, a sharp, three-pointed piece of zinc, such as always lie about where cornice-makers are at work. The consequences had been terrible for the foreman. Nelson had taken one look at him and departed instantly from the scene and from the trade.

Later he had heard that the results had not been fatal to the foreman. Still later he had joined the police force, and in good time being made desk-sergeant at Lawnwood Station, he had married, had purchased on the instalment plan one of a hundred similar brick cottages that comprised one corner of that made-to-order suburb, and had settled down and become one of Lawnwood's solid and stolid citizens.

He was fat and fifty-five. He had done his best to forget that he once had worked as a cornice-maker. But on the palm of his right hand he still bore certain scars. They were scars such as one receives only

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when handling carelessly sharp-pointed and sharp-edged pieces of tin, copper or zinc—particularly sharp, triangular pieces of zinc.

In the prim, pretty suburb of Lawnwood the only man with whom Sergeant Nelson found much in common was Otto Brandt, Banker Lawson's gardener. Brandt was a squat, hairy-faced German bachelor with rolling pop-eyes and abnormally long arms. He had held his position in the Lawson ménage fully as long as Nelson had been desk-sergeant at Lawnwood Station.

The bond between the two men had sprung from a mutual love of fishing. On Nelson's infrequent furlough days during the Summer season they were wont to catch an early-morning train for a tiny lake near the Wisconsin line, where visitors were few.

Here, in a flat-bottomed scow with lockers at both ends for lunch and beer, they sat all day, in broiling sun or pouring rain, industriously seeking to capture a "mess" of sunfish and perch.

If Brandt had not used part of his fishing time in detailing the abuse he had received at his employer's hands, Nelson would have considered their outings ideal. To work up a temper over the banker's harshness amounted at times to an obsession on the part of the gardener. But Nelson had learned almost to close his ears at such times.

Banker David R. Lawson, the object of these tirades, was respected and envied by all his fellow citizens; but it could not be said that by any of them was he admired or loved. He was a hard, silent man from whom little children ran in fear. His home, "Lawnwood," stood on a heavily wooded rise overlooking the suburb which was named after it.

A walk a half-mile long led from the house to the suburban station. Mr. Lawson walked that path twice each banking day of the year, once at seven in the morning on his way to his bank in the city and once in the evening when he returned from the day's business.

On some of these occasions it was rumored that he carried a fortune in the small black bag which he bore to and fro. The truth about this, nobody knew.

He was always alone. But Lawnwood was such a prim, proper suburb that no one considered seriously the possibility of a crime against its greatest citizen.

II

SERGEANT NELSON, properly burdened with lunch-basket and fishing-tackle, came hurrying across the railroad tracks to the little brick Lawnwood Station. It was still dark—the uncertain darkness of 2:30 A. M. in midsummer—and far down the tracks toward the city Nelson could hear the whistle of the train that was to bear Brandt and himself to their happy fishing-ground.

In the little smoking-room he found Brandt as usual, more than half asleep, his head on his chest, his long arms resting on his bundles of lunch and tackle on the seat beside him, and his heavy, curved pipe apparently ready to fall from his bearded mouth.

On the scores of mornings that the two had gone fishing together Nelson had always found Brandt thus. It was the gardener's custom on these occasions to ensconce himself in the station smoking-room at the approach of midnight, there to smoke and doze away the time until Nelson, relieved from desk duty at 2:30, came hurrying over just in time to catch the paper-train. Always when Nelson at such times awoke his companion, Brandt would sit up with a start and look around wildly, then, seeing Nelson, he would smile, remove the pipe from his mouth with his right hand, wave it in salute and cry:

"Yah! By Golly, so we go!"

"Eh, Otto! Come out of it!" called Nelson boisterously this morning, sticking his head in the smoking-room door. "Train's coming."

Brandt started. He looked around wildly and saw Nelson. He smiled. He reached for his pipe with his right hand. Then, as if suddenly becoming more widely awake, he swiftly changed from the right hand to the left.

"Hello! What'd you do? Cut your hand, Otto?" asked Nelson, as he noted the ribbon-like strip of white cloth that was bound securely around Brandt's right hand.

"Oh, only a little scratch," said Brandt carelessly. "A little rip from a hook when I am fixing a line. It is nothing. Are we all ready? Yah! By golly, so we go."

The little paper-train came to a stop with a great grinding of brake-shoes. The conductor, leaning sleepily out of the day coach, recognized the two fishermen and

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greeted them boisterously as they clambered into the smelly little smoker. They responded noisily as became the holiday spirit that moved them. In the smoker the news-agent, likewise recognizing the pair, brought card-board and pinochle deck without a word; and all the way out to the little lake they played in the stuffy, ill-lighted smoker to see who should pay the boat rent for the day.

Nelson won. Consequently, when they reached the lake he was so extra good-natured that without waiting to indulge in the usual coin-matching to see who should row, he tumbled in, grasped the oars and began the pull through the rising dawn mists for the scene of their fishing.

They fished all morning beneath a clear, unclouded August sun. The sunfish and perch were biting, and the two friends were not the men to fear a little sunburn. As usual they spoke scarcely a word during their fishing. At noon Nelson looked at his watch.

"Up with the anchor, Otto," he called, reeling in his line and reaching for the oars. "We'll row to shore and eat lunch under some shade."

The anchor had fastened in the soft bottom where it had lain since morning. Brandt gave a tug to raise it, and the rope loosened the white cloth around his hand. The cut in his palm began to bleed slightly.

"Plenty of time to fix that when we get ashore," called Nelson. "In the meantime, up with that anchor."

Brandt at last heaved the anchor into the boat, the final pull dragging from him a guttural cry of pain and vexation.

"—— those hooks!" he muttered. "Always they have to hook you where it hurts."

He put his hand in the water and trailed it along the side. As they reached the shore Nelson, before moving from the boat, helped himself to a bottle of beer from his adequate lunch-basket. He was raising the bottle to his lips when Brandt withdrew his hand from the water, palm up. Nelson couldn't help seeing just how the palm was cut. The beer paused half-way. He looked more closely. He started a little—uncomfortably—and looked queerly at Brandt. Brandt did not see. Then, deliberately, luxuriatingly, Sergeant Nelson drank his half of the bottle and passed the rest to Brandt.

"How did you say you got that cut in the hand, Otto?" he asked casually as he began to rummage in his lunch.

"From a hook," said Brandt, drinking his beer. "It is nothing. A small hook, but you know how sharp they are?"

"Sure," said Nelson. "Now for the eats."

Sergeant Nelson was not the man to allow small things to spoil a day's outing.

AT FOUR-THIRTY they drew in their lines for the last time, cleaned their hooks and disjointed their poles. Nelson fished one final bottle of beer out of the locker. As they poured it down their throats they contemplated their catch as it lay in the iced basket between them, and sighed the contented sigh of fishermen who have satiated themselves at their favorite sport.

"A fine day, Otto," said Nelson, nodding comfortably.

"You bet," said Brandt. "It is a shame that we must go back at all," he added reflectively.

With a nod of assent Nelson heaved himself against the stubby oars. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the flat-bottomed scow moved over the brassy water toward the landing-place. They had only time enough to put up the boat, gather their paraphernalia under their arms, and hurry up to the station as the 4:56 accommodation toward the city pulled in.

Stiffly, sleepily they stumbled into the smoker and dropped into a dusty leather seat with the obvious intention of sleeping away the journey into Lawnwood. They had, in fact, stuck their tickets in the window for the conductor, stretched out their legs on the seat ahead of them and pulled their hats far down over their eyes, when the news agent, laden with red-smeared extras of the afternoon papers, hailed them.

"Well, I see they got 'im," said he, speaking to Sergeant Nelson.

"Got who?" yawned Nelson.

"Why, that murderer, you know; the guy who killed old Lawson, the millionaire, down at Lawnwood, last night."

III

THE front pages of the papers which the boy was holding before their eyes riveted the attention of the two fishermen, stunned them, held them silent. The smeared red ink seemed to reek

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with the spirit of the crime itself. Sergeant Nelson and Brandt sat and stared, half stupidly, as the story told by the type burned itself into their shock-numbed minds.

The papers had done what they considered full justice to the story. It was the biggest piece of news in six months. All morning editors, reporters, photographers, rewrite men, make-up men, had been struggling at mad tension to handle the story as it should be handled, to serve up to the voracious public exactly the sort of sensations that the public craved—to produce, in short, exactly the sort of front pages that Nelson and Brandt now beheld.

MILLIONAIRE'S SLAYER CAUGHT! BANKER LAWSON'S MURDERER TAKEN AT LAWNWOOD.

This was the flaming headline that claimed the head of the pages. It covered a final bulletin which read:

A report from detective headquarters states that the murderer of millionaire David R. Lawson has been placed under arrest in Lawnwood.

But the bulk of the news was taken up by the earlier screaming stories that broke the news that the crime had been committed.

DAVID R. LAWSON MURDERED

Millionaire Banker's Body Found Beside Wooded Path Near Palatial Lawnwood Home.

Wound In Throat—Had Been Dead For Hours.

Believed To Have Had Large Sums With Him—Bag Is Missing.

Police Believe Robbery Was Murder Motive.

David R. Lawson, President of the Corn National Bank, was murdered some time last night in the woods almost within shouting distance of his magnificent residence in the suburb of Lawnwood. Patrick Donnelly, a laborer, found the body when on his way to work at six-thirty this morning. The remains of the banker lay behind one of the huge willows which line the walk which leads from "Lawnwood," the Lawson mansion, to the Lawnwood suburban station. There was a large wound on the right of the throat.

Donnelly, in terror over his discovery, ran to the Lawnwood police station for help. Officers promptly hurried to the scene and summoned Dr. B. J. Ludwig, the dead millionaire's family physician. Dr. Ludwig gave it as his opinion that Mr. Lawson had been dead for seven or eight hours, possibly more. It was impossible in his opinion that the wound could have been self-inflicted.

Officers have discovered that Mr. Lawson came out from the city on a train that reached Lawnwood at nine o'clock. As usual, he started to walk from the station to his home. From the circumstances the police believe that his assailant or assailants had been watching for him and lay in wait and attacked him in the lonely woods through which the walk leads.

It is believed that Mr. Lawson was carrying a large sum of money. It is known that he often did so, using a small handbag to carry the money from his downtown office to his suburban home. No bag was found in the vicinity of the body. Capt. Neal Gleason of the Detective Bureau, who has taken hold of the case with his whole squad, is of the belief that robbery was the motive of the crime, and is confident that the dragnet which he has thrown out will have the murderer in its meshes before many hours have passed.

There were many columns of it. There were huge groups of photographs. Of Lawson there were no pictures that could be recognized; he had not submitted to the photographer for twenty years. But the staff photographers of the afternoon papers had swarmed over Lawnwood with the first good morning light, and there were well-made views of the Lawson mansion, of the walk where the murder had been committed, of the grounds, which Brandt had laid out, and of scenes about the suburb, including one of the Lawnwood police station.

The sight of these familiar scenes thrust into the limelight of the front page drove the shock still deeper home in the two fishermen. Nelson and Brandt felt as if the sudden glare of publicity, lighting up their quiet little suburb for all the world to behold, had searched out and reached them, too. They continued to stare. Little by little their senses returned to them. They looked at one another.

"Ho-o-ol-ee smoke!" said Sergeant Nelson.

"My Godt!" said Brandt.

Then they turned to the papers again, to assure themselves by rereading that they had read aright.

"Well, what do you know about that?" finally demanded Nelson, helpless with astonishment.

"They got him!" said Brandt excitedly. "They got the fellow who did it."

"And here we've been fishing away all

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day as if nothing was happening, and here there's been a job like this pulled off—right at home," continued Nelson. "What do you know about that, anyhow?"

"They got him," repeated Brandt. "They got the fellow that did it."

"And using a knife, too," continued Nelson, uninterrupted. He shook his head with an expression of horrified sadness. "By golly! There certainly are some tough people in this world."

"But they got him," insisted Brandt, as if that statement alone had impressed him. "It says in the paper there—they caught the fellow."

IV

DESK-SERGEANT NELSON felt himself something of a stranger that evening as he came hurrying up the stairs into the Lawnwood police station. A new and active atmosphere seemed to have replaced the usual suburban air of the station house. The place had become temporary headquarters for Captain Neal Gleason and his detective bureau. It swarmed with the Central Detail plain-clothes men—the detective bureau's expert, famous crook catchers. They dominated the place, infusing it with the mysterious, nervous life of the downtown headquarters.

To Sergeant Nelson they were a breed apart—pale-faced, quick of eye, theatrical almost in their complete characterization of the metropolitan detective. Some of them slunk about furtively, like the one-time criminals they were; others carried themselves with showy, actor-like poise. But one and all they bore themselves with the air of experts at work at their trade—the grisly trade of man-hunting at its worst. Nelson felt rustic and amateurish beside them.

"Have you booked him yet, Captain?" he asked respectfully, as Captain Gleason strolled triumphantly past the desk.

"Not yet," snapped the good-natured detective chief. "Ain't going to book him here. Going to give him a chance to come across. Then we yank him down town."

"How's the case, Captain?" asked Nelson.

"Oh, cleaned up, cleaned up!" replied Gleason condescendingly. "We got him with the goods on him; the boob hadn't sense enough to throw away the chiv he did the job with. Found it on him. Dago gunman—Bald Tony. Bad man with a record. And he's been living here in your tall-grass precinct for a month, and you rubes didn't have sense enough to pick him up. If you had we wouldn't have had to come out here and make this case for you.

"Knew it was a bad man just as soon as I saw the job. No kid turned that trick; expert knife-work did for old Lawson. We got this bad Dago on the section crew here before noon, and the knife with the red stuff on it was in his boot. You rubes make me tired—letting guys like that settle down on you till they can pull off a job like this."

Nelson experienced a shock of guilt at this revelation. He had seen the section-gang at work often, but he had never thought of scanning those dark-skinned foreigners for possible crooks.

"Has he given up?" he queried.

"Oh, no." Captain Gleason yawned. "Says he got the stuff on his knife scrapping with a pal." He smiled in self-satisfaction. "He'll give up, though, when we begin to put the boots to him right."

Sergeant Nelson sat on his stool with a feeling of guilt and shame in his breast after Captain Gleason had gone on. The detective chief had spoken the truth. If he and the other Lawnwood officers had done their full police duty, Banker Lawson would still be alive, and the honor of the suburb would not have been stained by this horrible crime. He, Nelson, himself, might have prevented it—if he had done his full duty as a police officer.

It was in a spirit of contrition that he joined two brother officers in a walk to the mortuary for a look at the millionaire's remains.

This spirit left Sergeant Nelson the instant the attendant drew down the sheet, exposing the right side of the banker's throat. The Sergeant stood very still as he saw the wound. Something like a gasp escaped him. He looked more closely; his mouth was wide open and his breath coming fast.

"Ain't—ain't you got any more light than this down here?" he demanded petulantly.

He caught hold of an incandescent light swinging on a loose wire and drew it over in front of him. He held it close to the wound in the throat. He reeled and felt sick. A rush of old memories overwhelmed him—memories that he had long tried to lose. He looked suddenly at the palm of his right hand. In one glance he took in the

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wound in the banker's throat and the old, old scars in his own palm, and the attendant started at the cry that choked in Sergeant Nelson's throat.

The light swung free of Nelson's fingers. He stood foolishly stroking his scarred palm. When he turned away he staggered like a man mortally stricken or drunk, but when he entered the Captain's room in the station house he was himself again.

"What kind of a—tool did he use, that Dago, Captain?" he asked, looking Captain Gleason full in the eyes.

"Oh, a regular Dago chiv," said Gleason carelessly.

"Have you got it around here?"

"Sure thing. Want to see it?" Gleason thrust a hand into his coat pocket and drew out a sinister stabbing weapon with a long, curved blade.

Sergeant Nelson looked at the knife and turned away. The edge of the dark-splotched blade was as thin as a razor edge, and the point was ground to needle-like fineness.

V

DESK-SERGEANT NELSON sat for a long time on his little swivel-top stool behind the desk in the station house without saying a word. He was as nearly pale as he could be, and there was a pained, dazed look in his eyes. The evening was cool, but little white drops of perspiration showed on his broad forehead, and occasionally he looked nervously at his scarred palm. Presently he smote the desk before him.

"Why did he lie to me?" he muttered angrily. "It's all right, I s'pose, but why did Otto lie about his hand?"

He came out from his cage and sought out Captain Braden, of Lawnwood Station—Nelson's own captain.

"Cap', I ain't feeling well." Nelson was rubbing his troubled brow. "I'd like to get off for a couple of hours and fix myself up."

"You ain't looking any too well, that's a fact," agreed Captain Braden. He had noted Nelson's face. "What's the matter? Too much fishing?"

"I wish it was," said Nelson earnestly.

He put on his coat and helmet slowly and with obvious effort. He looked truly ill as he went with bowed head out into the night.

But he did not go home, or seek a doctor or any other dispenser of remedies for bodily ills. He turned his steps toward the great, darkened Lawson residence. He went, with his head still down, up the dark, willow-lined path, past the inevitable crowd gathered morbidly about the spot where the body had been found, up the hill to the gate in the red brick wall that surrounded the grounds of "Lawnwood."

He entered the grounds and took a short cut across the lawn to the little cottage in the rear near the stables where Brandt, the gardener, lived by himself. There was a light in the cottage, and Nelson, with something between a moan and curse passing his lips, strode up to the door and entered without knocking. Brandt was sitting at a table reading. The latest papers were scattered around him in profusion. Nelson closed the door and stood with his back against it, looking steadily across at his old friend.

"Otto," he said in a voice that made Brandt start, "how is your hand?"

"My hand?"

Brandt rose half out of his chair, then, checking himself he sat back easily and laughed.

"You're a fine one, Nels," he chuckled. "What for in the devil do you ask that in such a way? You know my hand is nothing—a scratch from a hook, what is that? You old rascal! Sit down."

But Nelson did not sit down. He stood with his back against the door and lowered at Brandt.

"Otto, why do you keep on lying like that to me?" he said quietly.

It suddenly became very still in the little room. The paper rustled loudly as it fell from Brandt's fingers.

"You have come here to call me to my face a liar?" said the gardener calmly. Then in anger: "What do you mean? —— it, man! What do you mean by saying I lie?"

Sergeant Nelson's jaw fell and he reeled as if Brandt had struck him.

"Good God, Otto! You ain't going to stick to it, are you?" he gasped. "There isn't any reason why you can't—why you can't tell the truth—about your hand, is there?"

"But, —— it, Nels," cried Brandt, springing from his chair, "what nonsense is this about my hand? Have you gone crazy? I give my hand a scratch with a fish-hook. Is that anything to get excited about?"

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Nelson shook his head. He stood before the door like a rock, and gradually Brandt sank back into his chair.

"It wouldn't be—if it was so," said Nelson, "but as it ain't, and as a certain thing's happened, I've got to hear the truth. You're my best friend, Otto, and I want to hear you explain about your hand in a way that will make everything all right. But explain you must. You got to explain why you been lying about it, too. I know you didn't get that cut from any fish-hook, Otto. I know what it was that made that cut. Now out with it, Otto. How did it happen?"

The room was still again. Minutes passed. Brandt was staring back at Nelson.

"You know—what made that scratch in my hand, Nels?" he whispered. "How do you know?"

Nelson came over close beside him and laid his own right hand on the table under the lamp, the scarred palm turned up.

"Look at that, Otto," he commanded curtly. "See that funny wide scar that runs right across the middle—the one that sticks out? Well, that's the kind of a scar you're going to have in your hand, Otto. The scratch that left that scar was just like the one that you've got in your hand now. There's only one thing that makes that kind of a cut. It's because the flesh kind of sticks to it and gets ripped up in a certain way."

Nelson's left hand suddenly caught Brandt's right wrist and held the injured hand helpless, palm up. He struck the cut a smart slap.

"How did you get it, Otto?" he said gently.

Brandt did not reply. Once, twice, three times Sergeant Nelson struck the hurt palm and repeated the question.

"How did you get it, Otto?" he said with the fourth blow. "How did you happen to cut yourself like that—*with a piece of sharp zinc?*"

Brandt writhed in the Sergeant's grasp.

"—— you, Nels! Lemme go!" he panted. "What do you mean? Lemme go, I say. They got him, ain't they! They got the fellow who killed the old man. Why do you ask me— Godt!"

He shrieked out as he realized what he had said, and bowed his head.

"I hadn't said anything about the killing," said Nelson sadly. "Yes, they've got a Dago over there that they say did it," he continued. "They say he did it with a knife like a razor. He didn't. Old Lawson was turned off with a piece of zinc—a sharp, pointed piece of zinc. Nothing else. I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him.

"You said that that cut in your hand was made by a fish-hook, Otto. I knew you were lying—knew it when I saw your hand out at the lake this noon. I might not have noticed how old Lawson was cut, except that I'd been wondering all day what made you lie to me about your hand. I knew you must have had a reason—a big reason, Otto—or you wouldn't have lied to me. You never did before.

"When I saw old Lawson I got a hunch what your reason might be. I hoped I was wrong, Otto; I'd give an arm if I was. But you just gave yourself away."

Sergeant Nelson suddenly ceased to be a stolid, solid citizen of Lawnwood. He became a member of the police. His left hand fell on Brandt's hairy throat and his right fist drew back ready to strike.

"You cheap, cowardly, sneaking murderer!" he growled in the voice of the police. "Show me where you hid that piece of zinc or I'll beat your head off right here!"

CAPTAIN NEAL GLEASON diplomatically choked back his rage and disgust as he was forced to sit in Captain Braden's room and hear the rustic-like Desk-Sergeant Nelson "make" his case. Later he was forced to see Brandt, whom two hours' sweating had forced to tell the whole miserable story of his maniacal revenge upon his abusive employer, and place his signature at the bottom of a typewritten confession. When it was all over the detective chief turned inquisitively upon Nelson.

"Where were you a detective, Sergeant?" he demanded.

"I never was a detective," replied Sergeant Nelson, and as if in an afterthought he added, "But I was a cornice-maker once, long ago."

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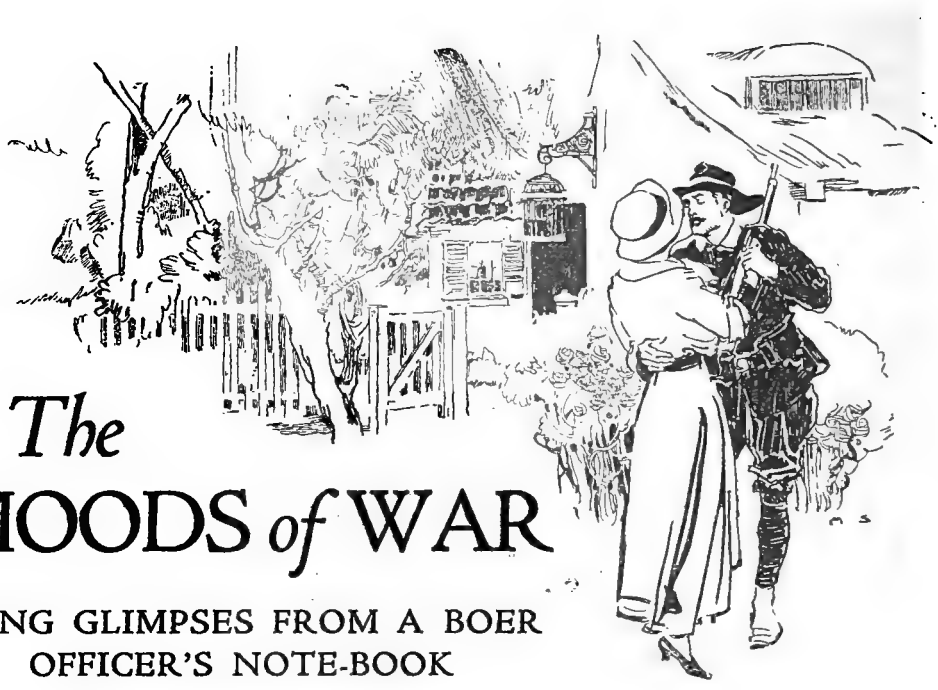

The MOODS of WAR

BEING GLIMPSES FROM A BOER OFFICER'S NOTE-BOOK

By George Albert Schreiner

Author of "War Day by Day."

YOU go to war and make the best of it. You discover that life is a thing of many aspects—that war has moods, a little squally at times, but not always the occasion for tears. The moods of war are life in a setting of extremes.

There is a pretty little village on the landscape in the morning and smoking ruins in the evening.

Some fellow gets tired of the regular bill of fare and grows enterprising. Another does a heroic stunt—not because he will get a medal for it; what he does is necessary.

You come to a house and find a pretty girl and regret that you can't stay long enough.

Other people's little secrets fall into your hands and you wonder what sort of men and women they were.

Perhaps the Chief Executive has to bid his own good-by—as did Oom Paul at Dalmanutha.

And above all you find the fellows in your camp in a different frame of mind every day. You find the "fresh guy" an unusually interesting creature—especially when he bubbles over with the joyfulness of youth. Then you study thine enemy at close range and find that he is "an amoosin' little cuss," whose hide you would be sorry to puncture.

As has been said already, the moods of war are life hitting the high places, landing you, on the rebound, on soft spots in places where you least expected them.

AN IDYL WITH A HELL-FIRE FINISH

I GUIDED my horse to the drinking-trough under the blackwattle tree, jumped to the ground, let the animal have its fill, and laid my own mouth to the hollow willow trunk that served as duct for the water. The business of war being not pressing just then, I sat down on the rim of the stone basin and had a good look at Vredendaal.

But let me ask you a question. Have you ever known a little place at the end of a valley where that topographical feature becomes nothing more than a cleft in the mountain, as seen from below—let us say a little village at the head of a pass, three thousand feet or so above the level of the landscape at your feet?

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Provided the scenery was up to snuff and the people who made the village were of the right kind, you will then have felt that not all of Paradise had been lost.

I had some such thought as I surveyed Vredendaal. The mountainsides surrounding it were as green as a green velvet carpet. Overhead stood a sky of brilliant blue, flecked here and there with a fleecy cloud, and illumed by the bright South African sun. In the distance lay the escarpments of the Hoogeveld—over it all the warm fragrance of Spring.

I don't know who named Vredendaal "vale of peace"—but whoever the man was, I will say for him that he had a keen sense of the fit and proper. No other name would have been appropriate.

When my horse had snorted the water from its nostrils, I discovered that Vredendaal was particularly peaceful on this day. The street lay quiet, and from the houses behind the shade trees and high boxwood hedges came no sound. Most of the green shutters and doors were closed, and the little stoops were deserted, save for the flowerpots and their gentle tenants.

It seemed that the breeze, sweeping through the cleft in the mountain wall at the end of the street, where the road leads down the pass, had things pretty much its own way. It sang in the sunlit tree-tops, and caused two telegraph wires to hum as if all the business of the universe were going through them.

In the little gardens bloomed roses and other flowers. I am no botanist. The other flowers were of all colors in the rainbow. Here and there vines—morning glories mostly—had been trained over trellises, and across the way from me some honeysuckle had been formed into an inviting arbor. The green recess was occupied by a table and some rustic chairs.

On the table a piece of needlework had been left by somebody who had been in a hurry to leave the spot. To this the overturned chairs testified. Was it an old or a young woman who had been called away?

On the white-washed sides of the houses the foliage of trees cast its delicate tracery. What sort of people had been sheltered by them? Villagers with few wants they could not meet themselves—with gentle ideals and easily attainable aspirations; simple people whose economic sphere was in their back yards and whose appetites were not a burden to them.

No doubt, men and women had lived and loved in the plain, charming dwellings for generations and gone to the little cemetery on the hill side with their souls whole and pure.

Somewhere a hen announced the production of an egg with a vigor that showed the event was of great importance to her. Yet how little did it matter that day!

In the blackwattle above a million bees were gathering the nectar of the yellow blossoms. A small, brown lizard made its way across the road.

It seemed inconsistent that the anvil under the tin roof of a smithy should be dumb. The bellows were not blowing and the coals on the furnace lay black and dead. I could see the outlines of the funnel, but no smoke, nor that stream of sparks that I had seen in such surroundings.

In the yard before the smithy stood a large block of wood. On it rested a new wheel to which a tire had been shrunk. But the job had not been completed. A ridge of the thick iron band protruded still over the wooden circle. A heavy pair of tongs was spanning the tire, just where the man had left it.

Over one of the hedges on the other side of the road peeped the splendor of a peach orchard in bloom. From the limb of an ancient *wacheenbitje* tree hung a hammock. Evidently the support of its other end had given way; it hung straight down. Possibly some playful swain had loosed the rope and precipitated the fair one to the ground—gently, I hope.

The shutters of the *winkel*, to wit, general store, were closed. On the porch of the hostelry two chairs invited company. The sign of the shoemaker swung back and forth in the breeze to the utter indifference of a pair of love-lorn sparrows which had perched on the bar from which the business card had been hung.

Some pigeons decided to give their wings a rest, settled in the road and began to run about in little circles in the manner of their kind.

From one of the garden gates broke a cat, blinked at the bright sunlight, decided that *it* had not yet happened and retreated. Some thoughtless person had left a canary bird swinging in a little cage of wicker work. What a fine picture of Spring on the veld it

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all was. Nature smiled with a sympathy that was compelling.

Where the road to the pass leads over the crest of hill a cloud of dust arose. I jumped into the saddle and dashed to the little schoolhouse, the first building on the left as you entered the village on your way down the pass.

"In the saddle, fellows!" I shouted. "The commando is coming."

Shrapnel was exploding over the retreating Boer force, causing the men to do some very fine exhibition work in rough-riding. I concluded that her Majesty's boys had helped themselves to whatever spare artillery there could be found in that corner of the veld.

As the commandant shot past me, he was a little out of breath.

"To the end of the road," he shouted in two gasps and tore on, followed by his burghers.

I was glad he knew the locality, otherwise he might have gone over a little precipice, some two thousand feet high, yawning hungrily at the end of the cleft.

With many a kick and shove we finally managed to get the machine-gun mules under way. They had hardly reached the shelter of a big rock in the turn of the road, when the Royal Artillery came once more to life. Two batteries unlimbered on the crest on which the dust thrown up by the Boer commando had not yet settled.

The first salvo went high over the *bilt* occupied by the burghers. The second was a great improvement, I am sorry to say. For a half hour the bombardment of the position continued, then infantry deployed, came as far as the first houses of the village, drew a bad fire, and fell back.

To the gentleman in charge of the operations more artillery preliminaries appeared in order. One of his pieces sent a shell to the middle of the road—to warn off noncombatants, I suppose. Then came a pause and a bad hour for Vredendaal.

One of the first shells lodged in the house of the shoemaker. Through the tin roof burst a flame, shutters and doors were torn off, for an instant the walls tottered; then fell. Among some vines another exploded with a blinding flash and filled the air with tons of rich garden soil.

When the smoke had scudded off, thousands of leaves began to settle down.

Systematically the shells tore down one house after another—like a huge invisible battering-ram. The fellow in command took a great deal for granted, I must say. That the village had been deserted was merely his luck. As it was, the population of Vredendaal was less than five miles away.

The geysers of flame, smoke, metal, soil and rock continued to rise from the ground. Of a sudden a spot would leave a little and the next instant your eye would behold a tall column of red and gray and white, reminding you of a bunch of pampas grass gone crazy on the subject of development.

Fire started among the débris and added to the impressiveness of the spectacle. The air was pungent with the fumes of sulfur and burning textiles.

There was nothing left of Vredendaal when the commando made its way down the pass at sunset—nothing save charred lumber, smoldering rags and yawning cellar walls. In the quiet air the ruins of each little house had their own column of smoke. Up in the blue heavens the vapors mingled, as did, no doubt, the tears of the good people of Vredendaal.

Poor, little canary!

I wonder what became of the cat.

A FIRE-EATING VECHT-GENERAAL

IN THE modern scheme military, the General is supposed to be a person who sits at headquarters and controls graphic command. According to the rules of the game as laid out by the general staff, and made possible by wireless, field telegraph and telephone, aeroplane, and what not, no Major-General would even come within hearing distance of the battle—provided things worked out. I have known them to fail.

There comes a time when the map is not as accurate as it was supposed to be, when the lines of blue, yellow and red, and the green for the enemy refuse to be intelligible —when, in other words, the system of field intelligence goes awry for keeps. What the Major-General, or supreme commander, would do in that case has once or twice given me a headache.

Now a *Vecht-Generaal* is not a Major-General. The military terms of the Boers never had an equivalent in any other system. I shall assume, however, that he is a Brigadier.

Such a man was Ben J. Viljoen—an officer to whom every bad name in creation has

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been given by men who did not know him as well as I do.

General Viljoen was a sort of undemocratic man, with a chief of staff who had no trouble getting our goat. But he had judgment and courage that could have been put to better uses by the Commander-in-chief. If I remember right he used to run a little Dutch newspaper down in Fordsburg or thereabouts, was elected to the *Volksraad* and served with distinction. When war came he was commissioned a commandant and a little later promoted to *Vecht-Generaal*.

Viljoen could get himself and his men into the ugliest holes the line in Natal offered. He made his mark by always coming back—on this occasion with forty-six men out of ninety-four. Conclude from this that he did not always get all of his command into trouble.

Buller was making his third attempt to get across that terrible Tugela. His artillery was posted on the crest of Zwartrand; Viljoen's men held the Vaalkrantz—some time in February, 1900.

It had been said that the British had something like twelve batteries of Royal Artillery in position, not counting six or seven naval pieces that had been part of the secondary armament of H. M. S. *Terrible*—that's the name, I think.

Viljoen had a lone Long Tom and a Maxim Nordenfeldt, to wit: Pom-pom. He likewise had ninety-four burghers on a *kopje* that commanded a drift through the Tugela river; others of his men were in position on neighboring military crests.

On the first day of the fracas the British infantry broke through, landed in a cornfield at the base of the *kopje* on the drift, and succeeded in getting to the top. Viljoen did not like this, and, though a General, who had no business on the hill, decided to become personally interested.

At the moment when this story starts, four men were sitting near Viljoen. In the azure heaven burst a shrapnel, killed the four men and fractured the base of the General's skull. He had admitted that he did feel a little groggy for a few moments. But under the circumstances then prevailing he did not deem it wise to let the dizzy feeling get the best of him.

Over a score of his men had already been killed, and the British batteries seemed bent upon doing a little steam-shovel stunt on the *kopje*.

There had been some mighty fine trees on the spot. They came down as if blown over by a blast of hell. Boulders the size of a cottage built for two became good material for concrete work.

The shells blew long furrows where the earth was soft, and stained everything and everybody a bright yolken yellow—lyddite being responsible for this color effect. That stuff got into your skin, and for days thereafter you had a dissipated appearance that made your friends anything but proud of you.

The weight of metal thrown on that *kopje* would have put any fleet of battleships under the water. Already the trees were down, the rocks had been crushed, dead Englishmen and Boers lay thick on the small area of the summit, and every minute or so some poor devil would drag his mangled body towards the slope of the hill, hoping to find cover that could not be had.

Had he followed the usual Boer tactics, Viljoen would have told his men to clear out as fast as legs would carry them. But the *Vecht-Generaal* could not see things in that light.

He recovered from his shock to see that the British artillery had put his pom-pom out of commission. The thing had been dealing out death in the most approved manner all day. Being well screened, the gunners of the R. A. had not been able to annoy it much.

But all things come to an end; so did the fine work of the hell-fire machine. Two batteries gave it special attention for three minutes in a regular "all-together-boys" style, and then thirty dead men were the harvest.

To the *Vecht-Generaal* this was disconcerting. He raced down the side of the hill where the fire was hottest, plunged through a *donga*, up the other side, across the road, into another *donga*, through a ploughed field and then up the side of the farther slope. Down in the cornfield, which the Tommies had gained once more, spoke several hundred rifles, adding additional speed to the mobile General.

But Viljoen gained the machine gun. Across the carriage-beam hung the entrails of a man who had been blown to pieces. The general stopped just a second and then raced on.

He had seen where the animals of the pom-pom had been taken to shelter. This spot he is said to have gained at a

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mile-a-minute clip. There was a hasty palaver with the driver of the gun. Two mules were seen to emerge over the crest and plunge down the hillside.

Then followed the quickest thing in hitching up a team that has ever been seen any where. The driver jumped on the caisson, lashed up the animals to the accompaniment of the bullets of the Khakies who had come to take the pom-pom away to dear old England, the General jumped on his horse, and then started a race for life.

The driver was leaning well forward on the box; Viljoen shouted, gesticulated, pleaded and used bad language in transmitting his wishes to the mules. He on the caisson used the whip with effect. In and out of the boulders on the hillside darted the gun, its wheels more often in the air than on the ground. Shell and shrapnel covered it with their smoke and the dust stirred up by the explosions.

From the cover of the cornfield the Khakies were sending a hail of bullets. Such a slam-bang, howling of shells; chirping, buzzing, purring, whining, whistling, and fanning of bullets had never been seen before. The very air seemed to spit fragments of steel and leaden balls by the ton. The ground appeared to be alive with a million invisible creatures that threw up dust and broke rock and stone. But the harder they pelted the fighting General, his driver and the gun, the harder went the mules.

Several times it looked as if the last of the works on wheel had been seen. Behind it, beside it, before it and above it appeared vicious clouds of fire and black smoke. Crash followed crash—and still the gun sped on.

When the pom-pom reached the crest of the hill its course had all the appearance of the water in a muddy pool that has been well stirred.

Then the gun dropped out of sight. Other artillerymen took it in hand and a few minutes later it was very busy cleaning out the cornfield at the drift.

By this time the fracture at the base of his skull had left little go in the fighting General. I think it took all of two weeks to patch him up, that is to say the doctor managed to keep him at the hospital that long. Some *Vecht-Generaal* was Ben J. Viljoen. May his shadow never grow less.

When last heard of, he was civilizing the Yaqui Indians for President Madero. I bet a cooky that the Yaqui did not look fierce to him.

THE PLEASANTRIES OF WAR AT NIGHT

SOME there are who say that war in broad daylight is bad enough. I shall not split hairs on that point. It all depends on how fond you are of life and a regulation anatomy. For the real thing in thrills give me war at night, with all its vague terrors, dreads, occasional gooseflesh, spectacular features and the like thrown in—forget not to add the ever-present likelihood of your own tent-mate mistaking you for one of the enemy.

I had my first taste of war at night down at Ladysmith. Through the predilection for gin and such, harbored by one of the artillery officers, a heavy siege-piece and two howitzers had been badly mussed up by British artillerymen and sailors not quite as adept in the use of gun-cotton as they might have been.

To prevent further accidents of that sort and to get even, it was decided to protect the approaches to the gun emplacements on Isimbulwano and Lombards Kop with searchlights.

The idea was a capital one and served more purposes than one. Buller had nightly been flashing comforting messages on to clouds that hovered over the besieged city, General White and his regiments. We could never read the sweet say-nothings, although at Dundee we had picked up enough code books to supply the armies of the world. Codes are easily made, however.

Every evening about nine o'clock there would rise from over the mountain ranges to the south of Ladysmith a long thin shaft of light, having all the appearance of a chalk mark running down the blackboard. Gradually it would tilt to the side, make a few long swipes through the black heavens to the north of its position, and wait for Ladysmith to wake up.

From the deep valley at our feet would also rise a beam of light. I think they used a magnesium outfit with a variable temper. Usually the thing needed several minutes to warm up. When it was hot enough to reach the clouds above the city, the stream from the south would dip over a little more and embrace it ever so gently.

With a convenient cloud selected, the

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conversation would begin. It never went further than "I regret to report" before the searchlight on Isimbulwano stared woer and woee out of countenance.

Sadly the man in Ladysmith would find another cloud for a perch, and then the operator on Isimbulwano would blur the sky most shamefully by cutting big, white gashes into it. Signaling by flashlight is no great success in such cases.

However, we had made up our minds to get even for the maiming of the Long Tom and the two howitzers. Nightly, thereafter, the guns were pointed once more at sunset and left in position. Then, when the hour of eleven rolled around, some twenty lanyards would be yanked and through the inky gloom of night would snap as many tongues of fire.

A few seconds later as many shells would land in Ladysmith. Fireworks—well, they are no circumstance to this little trick.

Ever since then pyrotechnics of the most gorgeous kind have looked cheap imitations of the real thing to me. I must say, though, that we did regret our inability to repeat the performance. When a gun has recoiled at night, it is a pretty useless thing after all.

June as a rule leaves the veld as dry as a bone. Grass fires will start on slight provocation and prove most provoking now and then, as you will realize if you have ever been in an honest-to-goodness prairie blaze. A great deal depends upon the height of the grass, of course, not forgetting the temper of the wind.

The British had driven us back from the vicinity of Donkerhook, a few miles east of Pretoria. All day long they had raked the country with an artillery fire that kept everybody interested.

Some of the shells had fired the grass, and a stiff breeze from the west was fanning the leaping flames with a gusto that boded evil. The fight ceased about sundown, our retreat was rather hasty, and the wind came about the same time.

So far the grass fires had burned leisurely enough. But we had hardly placed them between the enemy and ourselves when they took on a spurt that made us move with a rapidity that carried us far that night. The worst of it was that the fires had burned patterns into the countryside all day long, creeping down in the *vleys*, where the grass was thickest and where the flames could travel without the draft of the wind.

Night fell and the wind increased. Before we knew what was in store for us, we found ourselves surrounded by a sea of flame, racing with us, leaping into our flanks, making rushes against the van, crowding our rear and sweeping over the column again and again.

The clothing of some of the men took fire, the air was filled with the smell of burned hair, animals became unruly and in some cases uncontrollable.

Black clouds of smoke, blood red where the crackling, seething flames illuminated them, rolled over the ground and made breathing a hardship and seeing next to impossible. Pockets of gas formed ahead of the all-devouring sheets of flames and exploded with dull thuds—the roaring avalanche of fire was everywhere; back of us an enemy flushed with his first successes, and before us the question: What next?

The frame of mind that goes with this I shall not attempt to describe. I couldn't! It is one of those things that must be seen and felt to be appreciated.

Through a neck between two *kopjes* spilled some British infantry, not looking for trouble at 4 A. M. On the two *kopjes* sat two commandoes, looking for trouble since 9 P. M. It happened at a place called Baviaansfontein.

Of a sudden the hillsides broke out in a rash of blue-white sputtering flames, followed by the crackle of Boer Mausers, and the hiss and zip of bullets, directed on the faint streak of gray formed by the road. The streak grew broader and more distinct as the British infantry rushed to cover. Groans and shouts began to mingle with the angry rattle of the small-arm's fire.

A man on horseback tore back and forth frantically, bellowing instructions to the men. His mount came in line with a streak of Maxim bullets and went down. The man came to his feet and fell again. The men opened fire, pumped away for a little while and then went the road they had come.

War at night is a very simple matter—if you get the drop on the other fellow.

I don't remember what the purpose of my nocturnal promenade was. At any rate I was making my way through the low brush, boulders and grass with some care. We were close enough to the enemy to have heard taps that evening, which may mean much or little in the utter quiet and solitude of the veld after sunset. The outposts

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of the British were not more than a thousand yards away from the position we had defended all day long.

I doubt whether it is blacker inside the proverbial cow than it was that night. The gloom was thick and opaque.

Cautiously I stumbled along, using my hands most of the time as a beetle will its antennæ. It was a case of feeling for the next rock before you took another step.

The point of my boot hit something that yielded a little. Upward my toes felt their way, met with no resistance about a foot from the ground, pushed ahead the normal number of inches, and came down on something rather too plastic to be rock or an ant heap. My foot pushed ahead a little more and encountered a like condition. It moved a little to the side and things were not different. Then the extension of the sole caught on something small that gave way and then jumped back into place. That was enough. It was a button.

I knelt on the ground, pulled the raincoat over my head, and struck a match. The flare of the chemicals showed the face of a dead man. His eyes stared in the inscrutable black above. The match went out. I lighted another and saw that the man had been a mere youngster. There was no flexibility left in his wrist, let alone pulse.

He must have been one of the bravest of the lot. As a matter of fact I did not think that the British had managed to get up the hill that far.

I walked around him.

"*Op, burghers! De Engelse kom!*" shouted somebody near the wagon under which I had spread my blanket.

I can't say that just then I cared who came. For the greater part of the night I had been wriggling out of the way of the little streams of water that managed to get out of the little ditch that had been dug around the wagon in anticipation of the downpour. In several spots I was wet through and not in too good a humor as the result of this.

Well, there was no help for it. I crawled from under the wagon, gave my head a bump that did much to drive the longing for sweet sleep from my mind, then stumbled to the picket line to get my horse before some other warrior should make off with it.

It seemed that a spasm of yawning had the camp in its grip. Audible gasps came from all directions—the men were more concerned with sleep than the English.

"Get a move on. They'll be here in a minute!" yelled the person who had disturbed the sleepers.

Sure enough, the English were coming. Through the patter of the rain on the wagon tops and the few tents, came the faint tattoo of irregular rifle fire. After that things moved with the speed of lightning. Saddles were flung on the horses, the iron bits hit the teeth of reluctant equine jaws, stirrups clanked, men gained their saddles with the leather creaking and squeaking, laggards began to shout excitedly—the veldcornet's whistle sounded and off we trotted into the wet, unfriendly night.

Further on we were met by other commandoes—long rows of silent horsemen waiting by the roadside. Then came the very devil's own ride over two miles of slippery ground, the animals began to warm up and smell, and the men took their rifles from their backs and fumbled at the buttons of the cartridge pockets of the bandolier.

Little sirens sang in the air, starting with a shrill staccato and ending with soft, musical hums and purrs. One of them brought down a man riding ahead of me. We had managed to get into the zone where most of the British Lee-Metford bullets were coming to the ground. A short gallop brought us out of this. The little pellets of nickel steel were now flitting high above our heads.

Out of their saddles fell the burghers, stooping figures ran toward the skyline, and the racket increased in volume.

What were the intentions of the British? That was the question. They had gained a ridge some eight hundred yards distant, had driven back the outposts of the Boers, and for the time being appeared content with what they had gained.

But that was merely a conclusion. The men who had been deprived of their sleep had hardly found cover behind the boulders when the fall of many feet was heard. They were blazing away on the ridge ahead as if the Empire had to be saved that very night. It was a nice white ribbon they shot into the gloom; a measure of intimidation.

They made a half-hearted charge presently, pulled a wrathful reply from the burghers and then decided to postpone further addresses until daybreak, which was just as

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well, seeing that our men were not versed in the uses of the bayonet.

A LITTLE LOVE AFFAIR BETWEEN THE ACTS

SINCE I could say only complimentary things of so lovely a creature as Miss Nuivenhuis, then having her habitat four miles south of Coal Mine Drift on the Vaal River, there will be no use in withholding her name. Whether she called herself Betsie, Sannah or Christina, I don't know.

Methinks, however, that one Cotzee, a corporal in the Transvaal Staats Artillery, has since then discovered what her first name was—I hope he has made the discovery here below. Shortly after the episode we parted. For all I know he may be resting under the everlasting daisies by now.

Cotzee, myself, and some artillerymen from the Orange Free State had been waiting all morning for something to happen. We had fallen back overnight, some twenty miles, I should say, and were waiting for the empire-builders to come along.

Noon came and the reconnaissance party that had gone south had not returned—noon came and nothing but a few dry biscuits invited our appetites.

"Let's go to the farm over there and see what's doing," I suggested to the corporal. "I'll eat beans if that's all they have."

Cotzee was struck with the brightness of my remark, and ran to get our horses. Ten minutes later we reached the farm.

From the roof of the dwelling floated a white flag—token of neutrality. Under the tall eucalyptus trees in the yard nothing stirred. We rode around to the back of the establishment. Nary a soul or sign of life. Some chickens had invaded the barn and were having the time of their lives with the *hafer*—oats on the stalk.

Cotzee suggested that the farm had been deserted and that we have a chicken dinner that night.

"Not so hasty, Jong," I said. "I notice that there is a cat on the back porch."

The cat had arched its back and was sticking up a tail, whose tapering end was very greatly agitated.

All this we had seen from beyond the barbed-wire fence which surrounded the yard.

"Let's try the front again," I said.

This time we rode boldly to the door, tied our horses to the support of the little veranda and made our presence known by coughs and loud conversation.

The little trick worked quite well.

The door opened a little and a sweet voice asked—

"Are you Boers?"

"Well, yes," replied Cotzee in his best Pretoria *taal*. "Why do you ask?"

"Because of your uniforms," said the voice within.

"They do look a little Khaki, don't they?" I remarked.

"I saw you coming and thought you were English," explained she in the house.

"Not yet," returned Cotzee, who was quite a wit in his brighter moments.

She behind the door caught the implied weight of the remark and laughed.

"Come in," she said throwing open the door.

Very stiffly the two of us sat down on the two best chairs in the little parlor. It was a long while since we had called on a lady. Both of us were a little ill at ease—for no good reason. But it is awkward to sit on a chair when you haven't done that in a year or so; it is also awkward to have pictures of serene men and women look at you from the walls, the mantel, little tables and what not.

Everything in the room was spick and span and in its place, and we, well, I confess that we needed a wash; Cotzee smelled of perspiration and horse—I, mostly of iodoform and medicated cotton.

After a few remarks anent the affair that had brought us to the Northern parts of the Orange Free State, a baby began to yell most lustily. The woman left the room.

"Do you think she is married?" asked Cotzee with much concern in his eyes and voice.

"I think she said Miss Nuivenhuis—not Mrs.," I replied.

In a little while the dear little woman came back. In her arms she carried the veriest shaver of an infant, occupied at that moment with extracting the sweetness from a little bag of sugar that served as pacifier.

Cotzee was keen on the relationship of the baby and the young woman.

"Is that your baby?" he asked with bland bashfulness.

She colored up a little and laughed.

"No, he is my nephew—my sister-in-law's baby," she said, adding some remarks in the Dutch equivalent of the ootsie-tootsie

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department of the English language and kissing the little citizen fervently.

The corporal heaved a sigh of relief that made me stare at him. I tried to kick his shin but failed to reach it.

I was wondering how soon an opening for the broaching of the subject next to my heart would come.

"I suppose you are hungry?" she asked.

"A little," lied Cotzee.

"Don't you believe that, Miss Nuivenhuis," I put in. "He's as hungry as he could be. So am I. But we don't expect much. A few beans will do."

"I am afraid one of you will have to hold the baby while I get you something to eat. I don't think there is much in the house, but there'll be enough," said Miss Nuivenhuis.

"I'll be his nurse for a little while," I volunteered, and stepped forward to assume my duties.

But the little gentleman did not like my looks. Possibly the iodoform went against him, for which I could not blame him.

It was the corporal's turn. Little Jan—I think that was his name—spotted one of the gold teeth of his would-be nurse, stuck one of his pink, little fingers in the man's mouth and became interested.

I must say that Miss Nuivenhuis did her best by us. That was some repast—cold mutton, fried potatoes, pumpkin, one or two other things and some coffee. Both of us tried our best to feed in a sort of genteel way, with knife and fork, but much of the food was hoisted in approved camp fashion.

While we were eating the girl explained that her brother was at the front, and that her sister-in-law had ridden to her father's place in the morning to make arrangements for the family's removal to Klerksdorp in the Southern Transvaal. They expected to *trek* that evening.

Miss Nuivenhuis wiped a few tears from her lovely eyes as she thought of the step that seemed best under the circumstances. Cotzee grew very sympathetic and I tried my hand at consolation.

"You see this Henri-Martini," said Miss Nuivenhuis, as we passed out of the house. "I was going to shoot the two of you with that. But I had my doubts about your being *Rooinecks* after all."

Against the door-jamb leaned one of the old barkers and on the floor lay a bandolier filled with cartridges. Cotzee and I confessed that we had heard interesting news.

"I am some shot at that," remarked the girl proudly. "Shall I show you?"

We were willing to be shown what would have happened to us and said so.

Cotzee took a broken cup which the girl handed him and set it on a fence post about two hundred yards away.

"I can do better than that," laughed Miss Nuivenhuis.

She aimed and shattered the cup. You never know what you will get when you call on strangers in times of war.

Cotzee helped them move that night, and the rascal confessed to me next morning that he had stolen a kiss. That may not be true.

OOM PAUL'S FAREWELL ADDRESS

I AM afraid that one of the world's best and tersest farewell addresses escaped the attention of the stenographer and the historian. It was made by Johannus Stephanus Paulus Krüger, President of the South African Republic, on the eve of his departure for Lorenco Marquez and Europe.

For a month the Capital of the Commonwealth had been on wheels. For a while it kept company with an armored train in the vicinity of Middleburg; further reverses caused its removal to Machadodorp.

The President's train, consisting of five cars, on this occasion had been shunted into a little station called Dalmanutha, a point then some two miles from the English lines at Belfast.

All afternoon burghers had gathered at the station for the purpose of seeing the old man once more. It was hoped that his trip to Europe would secure intervention; in reality the President obeyed the pressure of those who wanted him to leave the country in order to get out of the way of the British.

Many were those who felt that the old man would get rough treatment if the British government laid hands on him; rather than have that happen the forlorn hope of finding assistance in Europe was magnified to Oom Paul.

That he hoped for a small measure of success himself was amply reflected by his remarks. But he was sincere enough not to mislead his burghers.

After an interminable wait, the old man appeared on the platform of his private car.

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For a moment he surveyed the crowd of burghers, then took off his hat, cleared his throat and began:

"Burghers—brothers: I am about to leave you for a little while—I hope for only a little while. I would like to stay with you and even take a rifle and go in the trenches and on the *kops*. But my advisers say that I can be of better use to our cause by going to Europe. I hope they are right.

"If I thought that there was a single man among you who believed that I was deserting our dear country and our people I would feel aggrieved. Your officers say that it is best I should go to Europe—to France—and ask that republic to help a sister republic.

"I don't know what good will come of it. I have no faith in the men who call themselves diplomats, but I hope that they deserve a better opinion than I hold of them. But other nations have interests of their own and if they should conflict with ours we need expect little or nothing.

"Today the veld is quiet. They're not hammering away at you with twenty guns to our one. Some of you men have done good fighting—wonderul fighting. There are a few commandoes, I shall not name them, who have behaved like cravens, who are unworthy of the traditions of our people. I hope that hereafter they will do better. This war is not lost yet, though our Capital has been taken, and much of our best blood has been spilled."

Slowly the old man's voice rose to its customary raucous tenor.

"I say again that some of you burghers have not done what is right. Again and again certain commandoes have broken away and given the enemy a chance to break our lines.

"This war is not lost yet, but if we ever are to win the weak-hearted must show more courage. Burghers, you must do your best and don't lose your pants because you see a bunch of *Rooinecks* come across the veld—shoot them down, destroy them, annihilate them, blast them. We have developed this country; it is ours. It is up to you to hold it for your children. The men of my generation, armed as you are, would have driven the English into the sea by now.

"I bid your farewell, Burghers! Support your officers in all they do. Some of you think that you are Generals. Don't apply that silly notion. Hold it if you will, but do your best to work in harmony with the man beside you. Remember that there is hope yet."

With that the president entered the car. The burghers were a little slow in responding with a cheer, but after a while those who had felt hurt forgot it and joined the others whose minds were easy on the subject on which Oom Paul had dwelled with such emphasis.

Slowly the train pulled away. Oom Paul had seen his burghers for the last time. Three days later the spot on which the "Capital" had stood was in the hands of the British. But the war lasted another two years.

'TWIXT HYMN AND LIMERICK

MANY of my good friends will remember the sermon that was delivered at the head of Van Reenen's Pass by a certain clergyman from Johannesburg who had more courage than tact. The occasion was the first Sunday afternoon after the mobilization. Elandlaagte, Dundee and Pepsworth Hill had not yet happened.

All day long it had rained in strings. The ground was a morass when the tents were pitched; there was no fuel, save cow chips which again become plastic in the soaking. Commissary arrangements had failed to live up to what was expected of them, and far away in the mist lay the armies of the British Empire, whose temper was as yet unknown to us.

The sermon is remarkable for the insight its author had into the human mind. Tersely the good predicant pointed out that the new generation of Boers was not as God-fearing as it ought to be, and that for this reason the Lord of Hosts might refuse to give the Boer Republics the victory in the coming struggle.

Especially bad were the burghers from the cities, who had come to care more for the pleasures of the flesh than the spiritual joys of the soul. If the Johannesburgers, Pretorianers, those from Middleburg, Heidelberg, Standerton, Boksburg, and a few other places did not forthwith mend their ways the outcome would be against *onse mense*—our people.

I will say that many of the burghers from the veld, the *tackhaares* even, found the sermon a most unfortunate enterprise. Some of the young bloods talked of lynching the

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gentleman out of hand. But that was talk of course.

During the many years I lived in the Transvaal not a single lynching had occurred. At any rate we succeeded in making the good preacher and his assistant give us their room; a week or so afterwards they were back in their churches on the Rand.

There was an element in the Boer camps that drew its religion from the days when one d'Alba played the very devil in the Netherlands. However, it was gentle enough considering its origin. Mostly it was a firm belief in the prophesies of the Old Testament.

The old Boer who could not find a chapter in the Prophets which demonstrated that the enemy would be annihilated in the end was not considered as well versed as he might be. Very often this sentiment kept men in positions which no other soldier would have held for a minute. As the decimation of the commando went on, the survivors would find consolation in their faith, blaze away for dear life and now and then carry the day.

Every night there was a prayer meeting in the camp. It had been tried to make attendance compulsory. First the foreigners, soldiers of fortune, and the city burghers objected to that, and finally the younger element from the veld rebelled. Nevertheless the meetings were well attended.

I enjoyed them. War brings moments when the mind must reach for refreshment beyond the real, the actual, the painfully obvious, the possible, and the incongruous.

Often have I sat on a *kopje* and listened to the hymn swafted over the veld by the gentle breeze, or torn into shreds and snatches by the hurricane. I have heard them when cliff and precipice, gorge and kloof, mellowed them into harmonious murmurs. It would be hard to convey an adequate impression of this. A thousand throats would intonate a chant in which even quarter-notes were few, and eighths unheard of.

From one mountain wall to another would roll the tones of the mighty chorus, striking each time with a peculiar metallic ring which you may get by shouting into a tin bucket. The sound would travel across the gorge and recoil a little subdued. Back and forth it would rush until it became the veriest whisper near the crest to be lost in the night, speeding, perhaps, to the seat of the Mighty.

Later you would hear a man talk. It is surprising how the human voice will carry under favorable conditions.

From every crag and cranny would come his voice, now sharp as the crack of the whip, then soft as the plaint of the bass string. The tones would overlap in echo and re-echo—the speaker seemed to have a thousand voices. He would say, "And the Lord—"the mountain walls would repeat the words innumerable times, new sounds would break upon the tossing reverberations in the chasm, and when the soul-stirring tumult ended you might hear the air say—"will be our salvation. Amen."

After that you came to respect the simple burgher; possibly you began to doubt your own shot-and-shell notions on military efficiency. At any rate you were ready to let the man have his way.

Prayers over, the younger element would seek diversion and edification in its own way. During the day the camp poet might have thought up a few more limericks and such. The following verse, given in the *taal*, the dialect of Dutch spoken in South Africa, will show what sort of poetry was in demand.

Lord Roberts hed een bok gerij;
Is afgeval, hed opgeklim—
Hed weer gerij, hed weer gerij.

The verse is innocent enough, and contains none of that bitter lampooning which English versifiers showered upon the Boers. In fact of the thousands of limericks and the like I have heard in the camps not one was bitter or abusive. Translated into English this bit of apt and subtle humor reads as follows:

Lord Roberts rode a billy goat;
Off he fell, got on again,
And more he rode, and more he rode.

The billy referred to was the British army, of course. Just how many times Lord Roberts fell off when he first took the animal in hand is now a matter of history, and consequently of small interest.

Most of the camp poetry was timely, or what is called topical. Here is a verse that was made on the spur of the moment by one who needed a pair of shoes but found nothing except a pair of suspenders in the supply tent.

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I stuck my face in Solomon's tent;
The sight was enough to blind me.
There's little pants I need suspend;
No shoes he had to find me.

Be it said that Solomon was the supply officer—a man who did his best occasionally, but was then confronted with the absence of a base depot.

Here is a little war ditty that can be sung to the tune of the one just quoted—every Irishman knows that, by the way.

I ride by night and I fight by day,
And everywhere is wa-ar;
I have no place where I can stay—
None bid me *au revoi-ar*.

In fact most of the camp doggerel was metered to suit this tune, as witnesseth the following:

The *rooinecks* are coming, *trara-rara;*
The *rooinecks* are now here.
The devil take the lot of them,
Lancer and fusilee-eer.

There was another song, with a waltz measure, and best suited as an accompaniment to a gentle gallop. It ran:

I'm a little Dutchman from the mountains, hi-ho—
And the bullets fly high and the bullets fly low.
On fighting I keep, on fighting I'll go,
I'm the little Dutchman from the mountains, hi-ho.

Needless to say, there were some others. But why waste space on them?

WHEN THE BATTLE'S OVER, JESSIE DEAR!

THE rifle-fire thins out into an intermittent, spasmodic *rat-ta-tat-tat—tat—tat—tat-tat-tat—tat—tat*. Conditions being favorable and enough gunners left, the artillery takes up the tune to accelerate the speed of the retreating enemy and burns up powder that might be put to better uses.

A Maxim-Nordenfeldt may hasten the progress of some cavalry screen or flank with a lively *pom-pom-pom-pom-pom*, and some outlaying genius in charge of a Vickers plant for the distribution of ammunition may chase another belt of 250 perfectly good cartridges through the hot barrel and wear down the last bit of rifling there is left in it, causing meanwhile the mixture of water and glycerin in the cooler to bubble over.

When his spasm of *rrrrrrrr* comes to grief with a jam at the intake, or when his ejector fouls, peace has been restored.

Then comes the chance for the ambulance artists to distinguish themselves. Hither and thither dash their little wagons with the red cross in the white field, pick up a fellow here, another there, dispense kind words and promise interesting interviews on the operation table, and act generally as they would in every-day life. I have been their guest. God bless them!

Into camp ride the men—ours did that usually with the mien of him who returns from the funeral of a third cousin, that is to say they laughed not, nor did they weep. You may have seen a farmer come in from the field after a hard day's work. He will fill the bucket at the well, have a drink, and then wash his face and hands. Yes, I have known people who managed to clean the dial without wetting more than their fingertips.

After that they would cook if there was something that would lend itself to this process; they would not cook otherwise. Then they would eat, or go through the motions anyway, just to keep in trim as it were. Would follow a pipe and pleasant cogitation on the bullets that fanned the face and cut the points of the whiskers under the nose. Would come that banality of war—outpost duty, and next morning more of the same dose.

Now and then this routine would suffer a little. I've known the good burghers to come from a hill, break camp, or leave it, for that matter, with a rapidity that would have delighted a modern movie manager. Action—why the man who thrives on peace and big headlines of war doesn't know, can't hope to learn, what action really is.

First you pump lead for fifteen minutes as if you had done nothing else all your life, then you side-step the points of eager bayonets for five, and while so engaged smash the butt of your rifle on some fellow's jaw, who gives a teeny-weeny little squeal and goes down.

Then if some other enemy has not punctured, your hide in two places with one deft thrust, you run down the mountainside with the speed that will never be equalled on any cinder track. You reach your horse just as the other fellows begin to pepper you, jump in the saddle, fall down the other side or play merry-go-round with the leather seat—anyway you get on the horse and then lickety-split.

When the bullets get a little thinner you reach down and pick up the stirrups, and

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later on you decide to ride on the saddle instead of on the belly-girth and its many buckles. Yes, I have done that—on two occasions.

However, you do not always get so hot a finish. Off and on you are taken by the enemy and then you are raced to camp to become the cynosure of all eyes.

They brought in nine Khakies one day. As was proper, only the sergeant conversed with me. He came from Manchester originally—Angel Meadow, I believe, but lately he and his had been stationed in the dear old Punjab—Peshawar or some such place.

"Blime!" he said. "Do you fellows speak English?"

"More or less," commented a chap by name of Bester.

"Why, I thought you fellows were a lot of bloomin', wastin', good-for-not-much savages," remarked the sergeant, finding a seat on the platform of the siding at Modderspruit. "That's what our officers have been tellin' hus. Reg'lar sort of eats-em-alive bloaters. I see you're pretty white at that."

"Yes, fairly white, sergeant," I said. "I confess though that I have a boy who is rather colored. No, not that sort of a boy—a black cook and bottle-washer, whose principal duty is to mix my brandies-and-sodas and sing me to sleep."

"Go on, you're kiddin' me now," laughed the sarge. "Got any baccy?" (Business of handing out baccy.) Enter Solomon of the commissariat and Cadet Leitpold.

"Ah, they got you," smiled Solomon, shaking hands with the nine. "Vell, dat is de fortune of var. Von never knows ven you're going to be cut off. Are you fellers dirsty? Come over to my tent—lots of vater there. Seeing that it is you I'll pour a little claret into it to vash the cinders out of your mouthes."

The nine departed and presently came back, marshaled by Solomon. They grinned thankfully and resumed their seats on the platform of railroad ties.

"Hungry?" asked Leitpold.

"No, they fed us over at some camp. Treated us real white," explained the sarge. "Say, fellers, wot's the war about?"

"Don't you know?" asked Bester, dispensing more 'baccy.'

"S' 'elp me, I don't," protested the sarge. "It's somethin' about not treating Englishmen right, I've heard. Out in the Punjab we was told that you fellers had killed thousands of British subjects on the Rand, wherever that is."

"You find out where the Rand is all right," broke in Leitpold. "You'll be there some time tomorrow. Fine place!"

"Is it the capital of your country?" asked one of the other men.

"No, my boy! It's the cesspool. Some day we'll blow it off the face of the earth," suggested Bester.

"Vat nonsense you talk," remonstrated Solomon. "It's the only ding in de country wort while. Let me tell you, Sergeant, it is such a peautiful sity—is Joeburg."

"I hope you're in it when we blow it up," was Leitpold's comment.

"But why would you want to blow the bloomin' plice up?" inquired he with the chevrons.

"Too damn many Englishmen in it; the gang who started this little business lives there," elucidated Bester. "You wait in case we are beaten. We'll dynamite the mines and then raze the place—not in the manner made famous by Jericho either? Bet your boots we won't do it that way. Off she comes, dynamite, gun-cotton, powder and shell, and a conflagration that would make the canaries in Nero's heart sing a double sextette in hallelujahs. Eh, what, *bruer?*"

"Yes, indeedy," I replied. "I hope we'll get time enough."

"Dese fellers don't mean dat," Solomon said. "They're stringing you fellers—dat's all. Now to show you that we're good fellers, I'm going to give the sergeant half a quid. You can buy yourself anything you vant vit dat. The sergeant gets two bob and the oders van each."

To our surprise Solomon actually handed over a ten-shilling piece.

"Bite on it to make sure it's not a photograph," suggested Leitpold.

To the dismay of Solomon the sergeant did bite the coin.

"Oh, I didn't mean it, mister!" he said apologetically when he saw what he had done. "It's a good one, sure enough. I thank you—we all thank you. Didn't expect that, blime! Decent sort you fellers are, for all your bloomin' nonsense about that plice."

Being a tender-hearted soul, the sergeant began to sniffle a bit.

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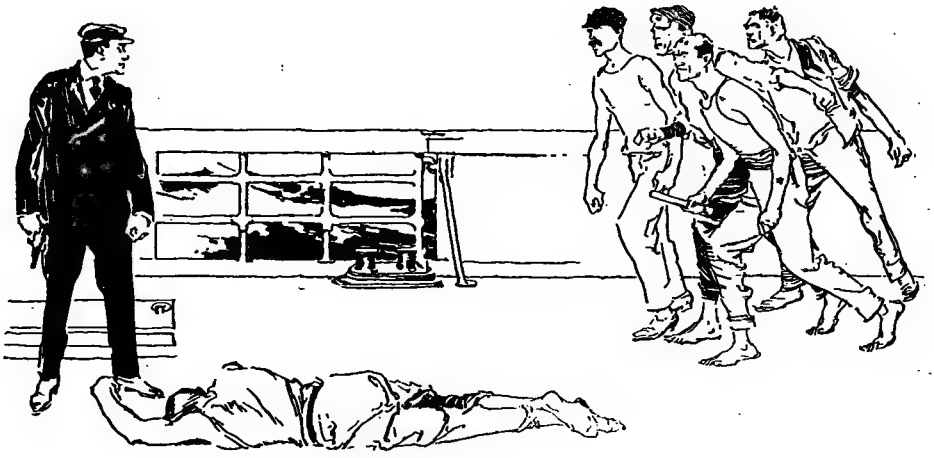

BROWN

By Mayne Clew Garnett

Author of "Knute Knudson, Navigator."

"COME on, turn out there! Eight bells have struck off! What's the matter with you—are you sick?"

Mr. Brown, chief officer of the freighter *Lammermoor*, was calling into the forecastle. His voice was even, a deep barytone and not unmusical. There was no menace in it; rather it was conciliatory in tone.

"Oh, the devil! What's he in such a rush about?" snarled a Swede who turned out gloomily and made no haste to pull on his sea boots. "I suppose he thinks he can bully us—that I'm afraid of him?" sneered the fellow as he lazily made ready to go on duty.

It was fully five minutes after time that the crew turned out and growling went on deck.

"Say, you fellows will have to bear a hand and do better," said Brown as they congregated in the gangway. "Now get to work on that hatch and put a couple of covers on—make them fast right. Then go forrads and rouse down that cable on deck."

The six men obeyed sullenly. The Swede, Swenson, growled openly.

"Aw, he can't put nothin' on me—that little rat! Aye ban in ships before he was born. He don't want to think I'm afraid of him—I ain't."

"No, there ain't no such rush for a hurry," assented another as they went to work.

It was the mid-watch, a little after midnight, and the *Lammermoor* was wallowing in a heavy cross-sea. She was six days out of Galveston and going to Liverpool full up with cotton, and she was now about the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. It was blowing a gale with prospects of increasing, the glass falling and the warm wind from the southeast telling plainly of a hurricane in the vicinity. Brown, the chief officer or mate, was getting the ship stripped of all gear that might wash overboard, and closing down the hatches. It would be very bad before it was over.

Brown was perturbed, anxious, not on account of the weather—he had been to sea for many years and knew how to act and what to do, but on account of the men. He had seen it before. He knew what was coming. He remembered his troubles in the last ship he had left. He was "Bull" Brown, a buck mate, a man who had been rough once when the occasion had called for it. He had been in American ships where they shipped all kinds of men and he had been in one mutiny. This had been a famous affair, a mutiny that got into the papers.

The papers had told of Brown, gun in hand, standing off the men who had come aft drunk and armed to demand satisfaction

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of the captain for some small grievance. One man, a noted "packet rat" had rushed Brown. Brown had promptly shot him dead, and the fellow fell, knife in hand, at his feet.

It was all detailed in the newspapers for the ship had been well known. The port she entered was New York, where everything that is salable in the way of news is retailed with various sorts of exaggerations. Brown was set down as a rough fellow and a very dangerous gunman. He was discharged from the ship, not for failure to do his duty, but for having done it too well. The company carried passengers, and it would not pay to have a gunman as an officer in a ship where he came in contact with the ladies. Brown went.

But wherever he went that sinister reputation followed him. He was a fighter, a dangerous fellow. He was also a very fine navigator, and sober, and he had little difficulty in getting a new ship. Within a month a subordinate insisted upon showing the crew that he was "not afraid of that gunman Brown," and incidently picked a quarrel upon each and every occasion to show his nerve. This may seem unusual to the uninitiated, but it is absolutely natural, absolutely true. Where men are gathered together there are always some who insist upon showing their equality, or fearlessness.

Brown, meek and mild, refused the quarrel always. Men began to call him a "bluff." He would not make good. He would not fight at an insult.

"I shall have to quit the ship or else do something," he said to the manager of the line one day after his patience had been tried to its limit.

The manager smiled sourly. He had heard of the fighter; he had heard several things not flattering to Brown. Brown was a quarrelsome fellow and a gun-fighter. He looked him over, and in spite of his eyes, which told him the truth, he remembered the stories.

"Well, I suppose you can't help quarreling with people—must be two to make a quarrel, you know. Seems to be your failing," he said coldly.

"I don't know what it is," said Brown with some show of heat, "but I don't pick quarrels—neither do I retail them to folks who are not interested in the justice of them. I'll quit."

"Sure," said the manager, and he paid him his run and sent for the "old man" to take him to the custom house and let him sign off.

In the next ship Brown had made good. No one seemed to know that he was Brown, the fighter, the queller of mutinies. He was amazingly kind and gentle with the men. Then the crew deserted from the very lack of rigid discipline and the next crew had several men who knew him well.

"You know who we've got for mate?" asked one.

"No. Who?" asked the rest of the forecastle.

"Bull Brown, the fellow who shot McGee. Now what d'yez think of that?"

Within a week several endeavored to show Mr. Brown that he need not think he could shoot men with impunity in that ship. Brown stood for things that would make any one wince. Then he was challenged to fight by a ruffian who had a reputation to sustain, and he refused. He was laughed out of the ship.

"Nothing but a pure bluff, a sap-head," sneered the crew.

Brown went ashore with the feeling that he had not been treated right, but he did not lose his senses nor his temper.

He had been out of a ship for nearly a year when he grew so poor he went into the freighter *Lammermoor*. In her he was no one but just a Mr. Brown. He took the berth with a feeling of something cold and hard within him, and he cleaned his revolver and stowed it well back in the drawer of his desk where he worked the ship's navigation. He would forget the past, try to do his duty and be no one in particular. He had thought of changing his name, but he had felt that it was not fair to himself to do so.

"Why should I?" he asked himself again and again. "I'll just be a Brown; and there's a plenty of them, if I ain't mistaken."

Then came the Swede Swenson, who had been in a ship with him before and the recognition was mutual and immediate. It had marked the beginning of trouble.

II

THE morning dawned with a wild sea running and the wind shifting quickly in fierce squalls to the eastward. The *Lammermoor* hove to in the teeth of the hurricane, wallowed loggily off,

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her long gray sides sliding slowly through the smother and her main deck swamped.

Captain Samson stood inside the pilot-house and peered through the window at the scene ahead. Mr. Brown stood near, and the man at the wheel stood stolidly between them, turning the spokes of the steam gear slowly to catch her or ease her as she gave and came with the pressure and send of the quickly running hill of water which swept with amazing velocity before the blast. The tops of the combers were blown away white, blown into drift and smoky spume in the squalls; and the haze of flying sea water covered the surface of the ocean until the whole outlook was something like a snow-storm, except that the weather was very warm and the wind held the feel of the tropics.

The second officer came into the pilot-house, followed by a fierce puff which forced the door to with a slam, in spite of his efforts to hold it. Mr. Simkins was dripping, and the water fell from his whiskers in a little stream, trickling down his chin. He grinned sardonically as he spoke.

"The hawser forrads was washed away, sir—gone overboard on a sea," he said slowly, without looking at the mate.

"What's that?" asked the Captain. He turned and gazed at Brown.

"I ordered the watch to stow it, sir—Swenson said it was stowed when he came aft where I was battering down the main hatch," said the mate without emotion.

He knew what had happened. A fifty-dollar line had gone overboard during the night, and he was responsible. He had ordered it below; but Swenson and his chum, Wilkins, of that watch, had evidently not obeyed the order in time and had purposely let it go adrift.

"What's the matter? Can't you take care of a line on deck?" asked the Captain shortly of Brown. "Can't you handle your men without always getting into a quarrel with them?"

Mr. Brown did not answer. It was his watch below and with perfunctory orders regarding the ship which he repeated, as is the form, he left the room and went down. He was raging. The idea of Simkins coming in and spitting out a thing like that before the quartermaster! It would be retailed forward as soon as that worthy went below and the watch would have a grand laugh at him.

He, the terror of the seas, the fighting man, had not been able to make a line safe in a gale of wind in a full-powered steamship. How Swenson and Wilkins would howl with glee and tell the men that they were not afraid of any such bullying mate as Brown! And he would probably be made to pay for that line. The management would see that lines would not go adrift in their ships when there was little cause for losing them. They cost money. Officers who could not take care of the gear could always pay for it, according to rules.

He went into MacDougal's room. The chief engineer was up and dressed and ready for a call at any minute. He had been up all night at the engines; and now that they were slowed down to just keeping the ship steering way to head the sea, he sat holding on to his bunk, undecided whether to turn in or not. The wild motion made him hold on, and he eyed a black bottle longingly as the door opened and Brown stepped in.

"Have a drink, old man," he said, reaching for the bottle above his head, where it was jammed between some books.

Brown took one. It was Scotch whisky and it warmed him.

"Well, how is it outside?" asked Mac.

"Bad enough—lost the big line last night—sea took it over the side after I told Swenson and Wilkins to stow it. Just got called down for it, too, by the old man. Now what can a fellow do? I want to ask you, Mac—what can a man do in my case? You know why that line was lost. You know why I have to stand for things you fellows don't. Have I got to wade in and clean up these 'brave men' who must go up against a man every time they get a chance, just to show the sniveling dogs for'rd that they ain't afraid of me? What's the answer?"

"Well, you know your business better than I do," said Mac dubiously. "You know what'll happen if you start anything—you with your reputation. I don't want to advise you, old man; go and clean up the bunch if you like. As for me, I don't care. The more of that sort pitched over the side the better for good officers. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall rule,'" he quoted piously, taking another drink.

"Well, I'm meek enough—too meek sometimes, I think," said Brown.

"He who uses the sword dies by the sword," said Mac, who was much given to

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reading the Bible and was withal a very religious man, a Scotch Presbyterian of the most orthodox sort.

"I see," said Brown thoughtfully, after a long pause. "Never knew just what that meant—but I seem to get nearer to it now."

"Sure, everything is true in the Gospels —absolutely true; only ignorant fellows like you don't always see it until you're shown," assented Mac.

"It may be so," said Brown sadly, "but I don't see the reason for it. I don't see why I must always be a fighting man, a killer, because some low scoundrel tried to knife me and I killed him for it. It isn't fair. It isn't right—is it?"

"That is a point I don't discuss—take another drink. Right or wrong are merely relative terms. I am only telling you what the Book says; and you'll find it true enough in the end, even if the right or wrong part of it don't seem to fit. You are it. Go to it and die like a man—clean 'em up proper and pitch 'em overboard if they don't do what ye tell them. A brave lad ye be, Brownie, me boy—shoot 'em up Jackson, says I. Shoot 'em up Jackson, good an' proper. Take another — it's fairlie gude stuff. Aye, sink me, Brownie, ye ken th' rale Scotch of it—gude—gude—beat it, now, fer I'm a sleepin'—see?"

Brown took another drink and went to his room, feeling strangely vexed.

THE *LAMMERMOOR* came into Liverpool with her decks swept, her life-boats gone and with a general air of dilapidation, showing her struggle with the sea gods. Brown stepped into the office of the firm and was greeted by the manager.

"There's a hold-out of nine pounds against you for losing the line that night," said he. "Better be a bit more careful—the Company don't want men who have to quarrel and fight with their men and then can't get them to do their duty——"

"That's enough," said Brown with some emphasis. "Give me my discharge at once —I'm through."

III

AFTER a month upon the beach, Brown found that he would have to ship again in some capacity. There were a few sailing vessels in Liverpool, and nto a full-rigged ship he went as second officer, taking the berth on his papers and going direct to the point. He was of course well known to all shipping men, and his name on his discharge and certificate made it impossible to hide his identity. He had already refused to stoop to the violation of the law and change it.

"Can make 'em sit up, can you?" asked Captain Snelling with a grin.

"Oh, I can make them do a thing or two —if I want to," said Brown without enthusiasm.

"Well, go easy until we get off shore a bit—Voorhees, the mate is a good fellow, and easy—too easy entirely. I've got a bunch of dock rats to take to China this voyage and you may drive 'em for all they are worth, if you can."

"I can," said Brown laconically.

"Get to it, then," said Captain Snelling.

Brown did so. He waited until the ship *Harvest King* was forty hours out before he made his little speech to the men, of whom there were thirty all told in the crew.

They congregated upon the main deck that evening when the watches were chosen and told off, and Mr. Voorhees had said a kind word or two. Then Brown spoke.

"I suppose you slobs know me. I'm Bull Brown. I'm the fellow who puts the K in kill 'em if the son of a sea-cook don't jump when I speak. If I ever have to speak twice to any son of a polecat in this ship, the second speech will be with my gun—do you get me? I know you for a lot of good-for-nothing loafers, a lot of cowardly rats who will take advantage of me at the first opportunity. If I ease up on you, you think I'm afraid of some miserable rat among you that I would hate to touch for his filth. I'll drive you—do you get me?—I'll drive you sons of Haman to —— and back before we get to Hongkong; and if I hear any grumbling I'll kill that man so quick he'll think lightning struck him. Go forrads."

Mr. Voorhees stood petrified with astonishment at this line of talk. It was not English, it was most brutal, most Yankee in its tone. He was so amazed that he even forgot to say anything. Captain Snelling, who stood at the break of the poop, smiled and rubbed his hands softly together behind his back.

"That's the stuff for me; that's it," he muttered to himself. "If we get this cargo out before one hundred days I get a bonus —I'd never get one with old Voorhees.

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This Yank'll do the trick—he's the stuff. Bull Brown is all right—I've heard of him often. Yes, often."

Some of the men were so dumfounded at this greeting that they hesitated when told off to go. Three or four fine fellows who had never heard of Brown and who had never been called out of their names were red-hot with anger. They scowled and wondered if the second officer was drunk. Brown, who was a small man not over five-feet-five and weighing less than one hundred and fifty pounds, seemed too ridiculous.

Any one of the men hesitating could have taken him up and pitched him overboard without great exertion.

"Hi say, Mr. Brown, do you think that the right way to talk to my men?" asked Mr. Voorhees as Brown turned into the forward cabin.

"Sonny," said Brown, taking Voorhees by the lapel of his coat—Voorhees nearly twice his age and fully twice his size—"Sonny, you attend to your end of the ship, as the sayin' goes, an' I'll attend to mine. If you want to ruffle, start something, and I'll give you what-for so quick you'll think you had sunstroke."

Brown went into his room. He was unarmed, but he took out his revolver and polished it carefully, reloading it and greasing the holster in which he carried it about his waist.

"It's pretty hard to make a fool of myself at my age," he commented, "but they will have it—there's no help for it. I've tried to do right, I've tried to be easy, and every cowardly rat who knows me takes a fall out of me. I've been driven from four ships, driven out like a dog. The next 'brave' man who drives me out of this ship will take a swim, or I'm awfully mistaken."

Brown went on watch without a word. He merely acknowledged Captain Snelling and took the ship's orders without comment.

He would speak to no one. He was a man alone, a killer, a terror; and he would fulfil the billet the world had cut out for him to fill.

It was very hard, very disgusting to him. But it was the law of man, the law called into being by the tendency of cowards to try out any one they thought others might think they feared.

IV

WHEN the *Harvest King* had crossed the line and run into the southeast trade, Brown had badly wounded three men in his watch. He had hit one more upon the head with his pistol butt, and that fellow wore a swathed head-gear for a week. Snelling said nothing.

A committee of the best men came aft to the old man with their statement of the troubles. Snelling refused to discuss the matter with them. For this, Brown hit one over the head with a belaying-pin and kicked the rest forward. He was growing uglier each day, and as the weather grew hot and torrid with the sultriness of the tropic ocean, he became a real menace, a bad man aboard.

Mr. Voorhees spoke to him upon one or two occasions.

"Why do you treat the men so harshly?" he asked. "There are several good men in this crew, and they won't stand much worse treatment. They'll come aft some night, and then——"

"Then they'll go forrads so fast they'll think the devil is chasing them there," snapped Brown. "Say, you, do you think I like this kind of work? I ask you as a man of at least ordinary intelligence. Do you suppose I especially care for this kind of thing?"

"Why do you rough 'em so, then?"

"Because—well, because they won't take it any other way—that's why. I had to leave half a dozen ships for being soft——"

"Soft? You soft?" asked Voorhees smiling.

"Yes, I have been driven out of half a dozen ships for being soft—get me? Just for being soft and trying not to let trouble catch up with me; and all because I had to put down a rising once ten years ago—the one you've probably heard tell of. I won't be driven any farther. If men want me rough, rough I'll be; and if you think there is any man afloat who can be rougher when occasion calls for it, let me know his name and I'll smear him out along the waterways—understand? I'll live up to the reputation they made me carry, made me take; I'll live up to it and go them about six or seven better, and Bull Brown they think they knew and whom they must show they're not afraid of, will put the fear of death into them or kill them doing it—see?"

"I don't understand your sentiments," said old Voorhees, who was a peaceful old

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seaman and a fine navigator, having a good education and a studious disposition.

"I dare say you don't. No one seems to, or maybe I wouldn't have to do the things I do. But take it from me, bo, I'm in this ship to stay. I'll be here when the last or best man is gone. There's a couple of good enough fellows in your watch who think they are not afraid of me and must show a sort of contempt to prove it—see? There's Wilson, Nestle, Biggs and Hendricks. All these men are afraid of nothing but *me*.

"They are afraid of me. They are going to show me they are not. They are going to be slow, to shirk, and they are going to tell each other that this son of a sea-dog of a second mate can't rouse 'em about like a lot of cattle because he's killed a mutineer in a fracas—see? Then you'll see what happens. There will be four men less in your watch, and you can guess the names of most of 'em by not half trying. No, there's nothing in that easy-going thing you do—not for me.

"If I was just plain Brown then it might go. They wouldn't try anything, they would take no trouble to shirk or fool me. They would go along doggedly like a British seaman can, go ahead and work without comment. But with me it's Bully Brown trying to run it on them the first order out of the box—see?"

"No, not exactly—but I never looked upon it that way before. I always thought that a man who had the reputation for being a driver like yourself—I beg your pardon for shooting it into you that way, but you understand what I mean—a man with a reputation like yours seems to always keep seamen away from him and out of trouble. They seem to try to not buck him."

"Well, that's just where you make the mistake. They seem to try to buck him, and they buck him just to show they are not afraid to buck him. And that is what makes me a bucko mate. I'm a bucko for fair now, and I'll never be anything else as long as I'm afloat. I won't go on the beach again and starve because the ego of a lot of ignorant dogs makes me show 'em what is doing.

"Now, we won't come together in any smash-up. Your men don't work in my watch except under stress, but when they do—watch 'em. Just see what happens to the four able seamen I've just mentioned. They'll try to show me up—see? They'll try to be slow under orders; they'll hold back in the dark, in the bad spots. Then see what happens to 'em."

"You surely don't premeditate crime, do you? For if you do, I'll have to have an understanding with you right now," said Voorhees.

"Start! Commence!" said Brown, looking squarely at the mate.

Voorhees gazed at him in amazement and anger for a few minutes, but Brown stared him straight in the eyes and waited with a certain rigidity of pose that was not lost upon the older officer.

"Well, I say, I think you a —— ruffian, anyhow," said Voorhees.

"Thanks—I think you a —— fool," said Brown without emphasis.

Then he turned on his heel as if he had wasted a valuable ten minutes upon one who never could understand and who would never even make the effort to try to.

V

THE ship struggled slowly along across the trade, and when she reached the latitude of bad weather the trouble began. It was "shorten down" in each watch; and off the River Plata she ran into the *pampero*, which blew a full hurricane out of the gulf.

Brown saved canvas. He drove the men —all hands—to their work, and at night he always stood in the bunt of the topsail and kicked or struck any man who showed a tendency to hold back or shirk. He also never gave a cheering remark, no matter how well the work was done. The men looked upon him with a hatred mixed with a dread they did not wholly conceal. Brown cursed the good and bad alike, being entirely impartial. No one could say he had pets in either watch.

When the gale died down the entire crew came aft in a body to protest to the Captain at the manner of the second officer. Hendricks led the crowd.

"I say, Captain Snelling! Your pardon sir, but we-uns can't stand no more treatment like dogs, sir. By ——, sir we-uns, wants a fair treatment—like men, sir," said the leader, fumbling his cap and nervously shifting his feet upon the deck just below where Brown stood on watch at the break of the poop.

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Captain Snelling met the crew at the steps leading down to the main deck; and there they stood, the crowd beneath him and about the level of his feet.

"Don't you get enough to eat?" asked Snelling gently.

"Yes, sir, we do, sir; but that ain't it——"

"Don't you get your watch below when the time comes?"

"Yes, sir, we do. We don't make no complaint at the worruk; it's hard, but all sailors' wurruk is hard——"

"Well, get forrad before I throw something into you," roared the Captain savagely. "I suppose you'll be wanting a nurse next."

The men dispersed slowly. There were some loud mutterings and grumblings, and some openly savage looks were cast at Brown.

"Leave 'em to me, sir—I'll wake 'em up a bit after supper," said that officer without feeling.

"Yes, wake them a bit—what's the matter with them anyhow. You've been too easy, I'm afraid, Mr. Brown. Better keep to strict discipline hereafter and keep them busy. They don't get enough work—that's what's the matter with them."

"Not entirely, but it'll do as well as anything else when a reason is wanted," sneered Brown. "I'll stir 'em up when it starts to blow a bit this mid-watch—you'll see some quick work aloft or some birds dropping on deck."

Brown turned and went to the man at the wheel, inquiring the course; and, having made the man repeat it mechanically, he gave it to the mate who now came on deck from supper. Then he started below.

"Better see that your men are in good humor tonight," said Brown. "There'll be a bit of wind again after six bells, I think." Then he went below and the mate took charge.

Brown turned in with a feeling of nervousness which made him angry. He was not a nervous man. Iron hard he was, athletic, wiry and, although only a man of small stature and light of weight, he was muscular and his muscles had been hardened by long service at sea. He was in perfect physical condition all the time, for he seldom drank whisky and never beer. The worry caused by the life he led, the bucko life he hated so heartily and which he had been forced to lead or starve, had soured his mind to a certain extent, for he had seen the inhumanity of man to man and he had felt it so often that he was growing callous to all feeling. He threw himself in his bunk with an oath and slept undressed the sleep of the tired and healthy workman.

The night was very dark and warm. The *pampero* from the river had blown itself out; but the ship, having been forced to lie hove-to during the gale, had consequently made but small headway and remained in the latitude of the windy zone. The fierce gusts might rush forth again at any time, for at that season they came often and without regularity. By ten o'clock it was growing very thick to the westward; and as they lay less than two hundred miles off shore, the heavy black bank of the hurricane rose quickly and unnoticed by Mr. Voorhees.

Gotlieb, a Swede in Brown's watch, came on deck at six bells and looked about. All was darkness and, save for the creaking of gear as the ship rolled in the swell, silence. Hendricks, who was upon the forecastle head on lookout, came to the scuttle.

"Everything clear?" whispered the Northman.

"All's right for it—go ahead. When I rap on the deck twice, slip down the gangway to the forward house. Wilson will take Mr. Voorhees aft to show him that main brace bumkin where it's broken. Use your knife through the side window—he's lying right close to the bulkhead, sound asleep. You can reach him through the window from the poop gangway, and for the love of Heaven sink it into him good—the dog!"

Gotlieb sank down the scuttle without a sound. In a few minutes he snaked his way along the main deck close to the waterway in the blackness; and in his hand he held a knife with a blade fifteen inches long and sharp as a whetstone could make it.

VI

BROWN heard seven bells strike off in the stillness and awoke with the strokes ringing in his ears. He thought it was eight bells and wondered how he had miscounted them. This was strange for a seaman. There was no sound of trouble on deck; not a sigh of wind, and the gallant sails slapped the masts with the roll of the ship.

The silence was strange, unlike the usual stillness of the ship in calm weather. Not

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a voice sounded from the deck; not a step. Mr. Voorhees was certainly not sleeping, for he would never do such a thing on watch. He was probably standing in the mizzen watching the western horizon. Brown lay and wondered if it would blow after all. Sometimes the *pampero* rose high in the heavens and never reached a ship off shore.

The second mate's thoughts ran on from hauling gear and working ship, to the men under him. He had struck Gotlieb that day—struck him in the face for not jumping lively at his call. Hendricks, the Liverpool rat, had .dared to grumble. There was trouble brewing, that he felt certain; but he thought he knew his men well enough. They were a poor lot, a cowardly set who would have run it all over him had he been easy as before.

He smiled at the thought of the "brave" men who insisted on trying ends with him always to show that they were not afraid of him. Why couldn't they treat him like a man instead of a monster, a giant or fiend?

He reached mechanically above his head where his heavy revolver hung in its holster. His hand touched the black rubber butt and his sinewy fingers closed upon it thoughtlessly. He stretched himself as he did this and was about to roll over and doze the remaining half-hour due him before he was called for duty. A slight noise sounded at the window over his head.

The forward cabin in the ship was as in most ships, except that the officers' rooms were under the poop and the passageway which ran under the half deck was closed. The bulkheads of the rooms ended at the half deck and there was a window directly over the bunk. Also there was a window facing forward and opening on the main deck at the height of a man's head. The window at the half deck or side was just as high, but because the half deck was five feet high, the sill was close to the gangway and one walking along would have the window about his knees.

At this window Brown heard a slight movement. He thought it was Mr. Voorhees standing there, and probably rubbing his feet upon the planks. But the sound was a very soft one, a slight sliding noise which suddenly ended. Brown looked up at the black square of the window right at his head. He could reach it with his hand as he lay directly beneath.

The shutter of the forward window had been fastened, as the sea had been breaking heavily on the main deck for some days previously. Brown watched the square of black; the dim light from the forward cabin, where a lamp always burned at night, coming through the scroll work at the top of the bulkhead, made the black square seem blacker than the darkness itself.

Brown listened intently, with the pistol grasped in his hand. Something made him nervous, made him suspicious of the darkness and silence. He lay a few minutes wide awake, gazing at the square of the window, and as he watched he saw a hand come slowly inside the black space. In the hand was a long knife—a thin, glittering knife.

He noticed that the hand was sinewy and that there was a blue star upon it near the thumb joint. He remembered that star, the blue star pricked into Gotlieb's hand. And as he remembered it he remembered also that Gotlieb was the man he had struck that day for the first time. With a sudden wrench and twist he flung himself clear of the bunk just as that knife plunged downward into it and buried itself in the bedclothes.

As Brown flung himself clear he fired straight through the black opening of the window. He fired again and again with a sudden furious, nervous passion at the horror of the thing he had just escaped. The roar of the gun was deafening within the small stateroom and the smoke choked him. He flung open the door and dashed out into the alleyway.

Captain Snelling, hearing the firing, sprang from his bunk and started up the companionway. At the top, Hendricks stood armed with an ax, and mistaking the Captain for the second officer, he struck him to the deck—dead.

Mr. Voorhees, seeing his commander killed, closed with Hendricks and would have thrown him bodily overboard had not Gotlieb, blinded with blood from a bullet-wound through the face, swung around the corner of the cabin-house and closed with his knife, slashing and stabbing with the fury of a madman.

Brown came up the forward steps to the poop to see the struggle and, thinking that there was a general mutiny, promptly opened upon both Hendricks and Gotlieb. In the dark his shots were not accurate, but Hendricks fell with a bullet through

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his heart, while Gotlieb, taking the last two shots in various parts of his body, saw that to stay was only to invite a certain death.

He preferred to die by his own hand rather than by that of the man whom he so hated; and flinging his knife with all its force at the second officer, who took the point of it through his leg above the knee, the seaman sprang upon the rail. Here he balanced a moment and cursed wildly and furiously at Brown, calling him the murderer of all, the fiend who had run him amuck. Then with a wild yell, he plunged over the side into the sea and disappeared.

Brown found himself upon the deck of the ship with both officers dead and two men short. The crew came crowding aft to see what had taken place, and from their looks and manner Brown rightly knew they were expecting trouble and had been prepared to help. The suddenness and fatal termination of the thing had appalled them, stunned them temporarily. The second officer rushed to his room and, grabbing a handful of ammunition, threw his revolver open and reloaded it as he dashed again on deck.

"Down there!" he yelled. "Back there—back to the forecastle, every one of you! Get forward, or I'll kill the last man of you!"

Some of the men held back. The pistol flashed again and again in the darkness; and the sharp report, followed by the yells of wounded men, gave impetus to the rest. Their zeal for trouble abated. They slunk forward.

Brown called the steward and carpenter. These men he appointed as officers and told them to go forward and iron the whole crew.

Within an hour after the first shot, Brown was in command of a ship whose crew was in irons save for the two men mentioned and the man at the wheel.

VII

THE rest of that voyage of the *Harvest King* has gone on record; it was one of the hardest in history. Brown ran his ship into Hongkong and turned her over to her agents with the report of both master and mate killed, two men dead and four wounded since the voyage began.

It was a report that will probably stand alone for terseness and amazing simplicity, also for its own sake as a remarkable account of a remarkable voyage.

"If you had had a few miles farther to go you would have probably come in single-handed and alone?" suggested the amazed and highly incensed agent, who read it and turned it over to the authorities.

"It is possible, but not probable," assented Brown sourly. "But as I shall take the ship home, I would suggest that you sign in her yourself and take a try at it. From your appreciation of the matter I am certain that you and I would have an understanding before we crossed."

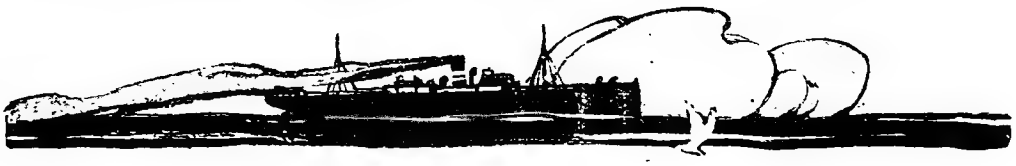
In spite of the agent and others, Brown took the ship back to England. He was never tried for any violation of law, for he violated nothing. He had made good the reputation that seamen had forced upon him.

He was no longer looked upon as a possibility in a ship. Nor did he ever even apply for another berth. He retired from the sea forthwith.

DOWN in a little shop near the Strand a white-headed man preaches to seamen every Sunday. That he is or was a sailor is certain. He is also an American, but his name is no longer Brown. It is a less common one, a name with no particular meaning among sailors, among the men who know the sea and its followers. The texts of this old fellow's sermons are almost invariably similar, and he begins them with the words:

"He who taketh the sword shall die by the sword."

Sometimes he varies the words, but always he gets back to the meaning, the same meaning as in the beginning. And he is a very kindly old fellow, giving freely of his little store to any seaman in distress who might come to him for aid. Some of the older "shellbacks" know who he is, but they are very few.



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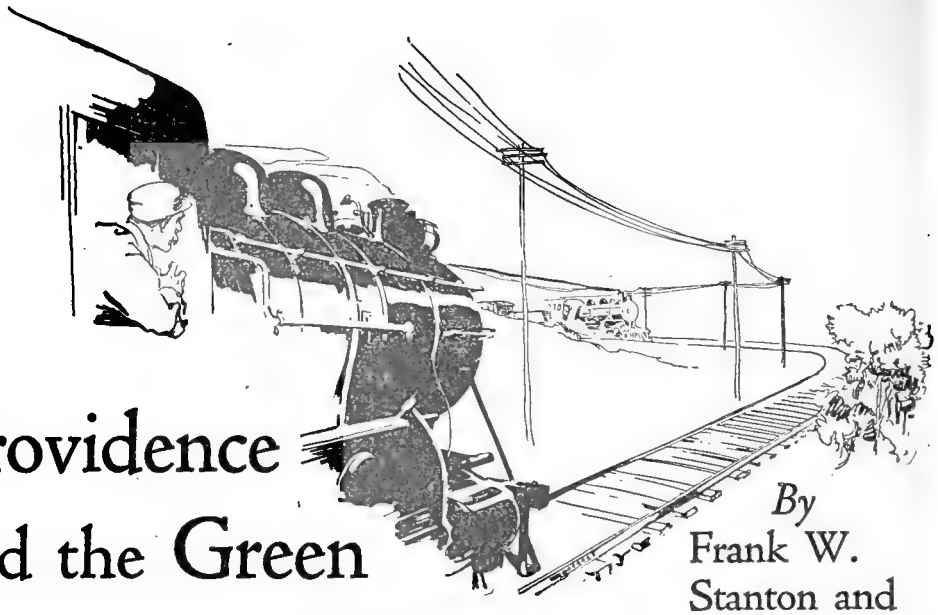

Providence and the Green Apples

By Frank W. Stanton and Stephen Allen Reynolds

DESPATCHER William J. MacDonald, who held down the third "trick" at Lurline, on the C. J. & T., was a conscientious, big-hearted, hard-working fellow whom every one liked. To all his fellow employees, from the humblest wiper in the big round-house just up the track, all the way up the pay-roll to the rarely seen "G. M.," he was, either "Billy" or "Mac." In other words, he was as popular as he was competent.

And yet it was an open secret that Billy had had a rather muddy past.

The fine network of purple veins at the base of the nose of the smooth-shaven despatcher with the serious blue eyes—marks which years of clean living had failed to erase—more than hinted at liquor. And a twitching of his nimble fingers, a gleam in his blue eyes, when he stood sipping ginger-ale and looking over the shoulders of the poker-players in the Mansion House bar, was some slight indication that an over-fondness for cards might have had something to do with his early mistakes.

It was also an open secret that Billy had a wife and baby somewhere, a little family he had lost through his own faults and weaknesses. Furthermore, it was actually known that the despatcher had for several years been trying to locate his wife and child by means of personals in the Kansas City *Recorder* and the St. Louis *Post-Herald*. For the advertisements had been seen and commented upon.

At any rate, since his advent in Lurline some seven years before, Billy had been the very carnation of correctness—the very pink of propriety—in so far as his conduct both on and off duty was concerned. Ginger-ale was his strongest tipple; and no one had seen him touch a card.

And as the pay-car paused at Lurline on its monthly trips, Billy's bank account at the Farmers' National waxed fatter with each visit. His needs were slight, his manner of living both sane and economical.

There came a week when the advertisements ceased to appear; a day when Billy seemed to have grown ten years younger. He called at the bank and withdrew a considerable sum. He purchased a postal money-order, and thereafter haunted the vicinity of the post-office, awaiting anxiously the distribution of the single daily mail from the west.

"He's found his family," whispered the knowing ones of Lurline.

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"He's sent for his wife and baby," they said more openly a few days later when they learned that the despatcher had rented three rooms, and had spent an hour or two in Devine's furniture store.

And it was true. From far-off California had come an answer to the "personals" which had gladdened Billy's heart—a thin letter whose bitter-sweet contents were sacred to him alone.

"So they're coming," smiled Neil Rice, the grizzled, good-natured division "super" who had known MacDonald longer than any other employee of the C. J. & T.

Billy looked up from his key to face the man who knew his whole miserable past—the genial believer in men who had put him on his feet and stuck by him.

"They're aboard Twelve," he said quietly, his voice barely audible above the chattering keys.

The boss of the division glanced at the electric clock on the wall, whose restless hands indicated the hour of 2:10 A. M. Another glance at the yellow train-chart at MacDonald's elbow told him that Twelve was on time.

A few moments of silence ensued. With nothing to do for the time being, the third trick man stared out of the open window. Through the mist of years he saw in fancy the face of his loved ones, the little family he had so nearly lost for all time. He knew within a mile that bit of the road where Twelve was tearing eastward through the sultry night, with "Smoky" Ham Nason at the throttle of the big ten-wheeler.

At 5:50 in the morning, if all went well, the semaphore hand at the western end of the yard limit would drop, the "Atlantic Mail" would roar alongside the wooden platform, Smoky would twist on his "air," the brake-shoes would crash against the clicking wheels, and then—and then——

The despatcher's Adam's apple rose and fell as he gulped at his thoughts. He rolled higher the sleeves of his neat negligee; pulled down his green eye-shade an inch.

"The kid'll be going on eleven now, won't she?" ventured Rice.

The speaker's teeth gripped firmly the bit of his brier, while his lean, brown hands rolled and pinched a pipeful of cut plug into shape.

MacDonald nodded. He fumbled in his hip-pocket, produced a pigskin bill-fold, and from it took an unmounted photograph. For an instant, with fast dimming eyes, he stared at the print; then he handed it to his superior.

"That's what she looked like last Summer," he said as he turned to answer a call. "Just got it yesterday," he added over his shoulder.

The wistful eyes of a girl of ten stared up at the super. Through the gray haze of his steaming brier the "old timer" noted that the child had Billy's forehead and chin. Behind the girl the low eaves of an humble cottage were discernible. The little one held a book in her hands. But that her thoughts were not on her reading was evident by a mere glance at the soulful eyes. In them one could see an expression as if the gray-eyed tot were looking for some one.

"I've seen the same expression at least a thousand times in Billy's blue eyes," mused Neil Rice as he drew hard at his dying pipe.

The super's thoughts went back a number of years. He saw a small station on the "Katy," many miles away. A brown-haired woman bearing a chubby babe of two approached the office where Billy was pounding out terse Morse in promising fashion. The woman got a kiss. The baby got both a kiss and a toss. Involuntarily Rice smiled to himself.

Then his face hardened as he pictured a "rough-house" scene in the "Division" at Dallas—the night when liquor-crazed Mac had——

A WHISTLE from the despatcher broke in upon the division super's reflections. There was a disgusted note in the whistle—a tone that made the super's eyebrows go up.

Billy was busy rearranging the pins and crossed threads upon the train-chart. Quite evidently he was changing a "meet."

"Who is it?" asked the super, his railroading instincts immediately on the alert.

"Ferguson driving Seven," answered MacDonald. "Injector working badly—kicking about the coal. Can't make steam."

"—— the purchasing agent, and *all* purchasing agents!" burst from Rice. "They mighta known we couldn't make steam with that cheap Territory slack they're laying in."

Billy bent to his key, while the super yawned and then puffed moodily at his pipe.

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"Believe I'll turn in," came from the latter as MacDonald turned once more from the key to frown at the train-chart.

The super rose, handed over the print, stretched himself; and then, as his eyes encountered those of Billy's, his right hand shot out and seized that of the younger man in a whole-souled, crushing grip.

"So long, Billy. I'll see you in the morning—after Twelve pulls in." There was a wealth of meaning in the few words of the old railroader.

MacDonald's face lit up. He swallowed hard, then turned back to his bench. A sounder was pounding out its message to him.

Neil Rice, an old "brass-pounder" himself, lingered to read the message.

"Humph!" he muttered as East Huntington reported Seven leaving for the westward with four more lost minutes against it. "Now they'll have to meet at Brixton."

Billy's eyes flashed to the face of the clock. Then he nodded and turned to the train-chart, criss-crossed Santa Fé fashion with its threads of vari-colored silk, each thread representing a train, each crossing of the threads representing a meeting point for one train to pass another on the single-tracked C. J. & T.

"B-x, b-x, b-x," called MacDonald in staccato Morse.

Thrice he sounded Brixton's call, following it with his official "sig," and the "9-9-9" which precedes train orders.

"Dot-dot; dot-dot;" flashed back Reardon, the operator at Brixton.

Rapidly, skilfully, MacDonal ticked off the train order arranging for the new "meet." The mixed freight, Seven, was to side-track at Brixton to permit the Atlantic Mail to pass. With Reardon's "O. K." still ringing in his ears, the despatcher called up Fabian, the nearest "all-night" station to the westward of Brixton. With Fabian on the alert, MacDonal wired his orders to the conductor and engineman of Twelve—the train that was bearing nearer to him every moment the woman of his choice, his own flesh and blood.

Fabian having repeated the message, Billy closed the circuit and gave his attention to the chart. His trained fingers moving nimbly; he advanced Twelve's pin a hole. The blue thread representing the Atlantic Mail now crossed the red thread of the mixed freight at Brixton.

A glance at the clock, a notation upon a schedule before him, completed the transaction. Both Fabian and Brixton had read and repeated his orders. As far as human ingenuity and foresight could provide for it, westbound Seven would take to the Brixton siding; where, some twelve minutes and odd seconds later, the eastbound Mail would flash past at almost full speed.

Something—he could never recollect what it was—caused the gray-headed super to linger. He listened approvingly as MacDonald ticked off his orders in faultless Telegraphese. He made some remark about the muggy, sultry night. He refilled and relit his pipe.

"By the way," he said some minutes later, "you might ask Reardon to inquire how Ferguson's getting on with his injector."

"B-x, b-x, b-x," sounded MacDonald in response to the super's suggestion.

For fully a minute the despatcher sounded the Brixton call, alternately interjecting his official signature. But no signal came from the other end of the wire. Spontaneously the eyes of both men leaped to the face of the clock.

"That's funny," muttered the super, "Ferguson ought to be oiling up just opposite Reardon's office. Seven must have pulled in at least five minutes ago."

"And with his windows open, and that giant sounder pounding away, Reardon can't help but hear it—even if he's standing out on the middle of the right-o'-way," was MacDonald's comment.

He frowned as he pounded away at the Brixton call. Then he added:

"Maybe the engine's popping off. That'd kill the sound."

"No danger; not with that coal," grumbled Rice.

The minutes passed by. Billy continued calling the silent station. Fabian called to report Twelve leaving for the eastward. Reports of other trains came clicking in; and still, at intervals, the second trick man continued calling Brixton.

"There's something about this I don't like," grumbled the super.

He scowled at the clock, and then bent over the despatcher.

He was on the point of saying: "S'pose anything happened to Reardon that he didn't hold up Seven, and Ferguson would keep on for the original meet at Fabian?" But his lips refused to form the words. He knew that in such an event the two trains

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would come together. There would most certainly be a head-on collision, with serious loss of life.

The twelve minutes and odd seconds were nearly up. It was almost time for the Atlantic Mail to flash past Brixton. Reardon's place was now at his key to report the passing of the mail train. Still no answer came to the despatcher's now incessant call.

FINE lines made their appearance around MacDonald's eyes and forehead. His lips puckered, the muscles at his jaw angles stood out as he clenched his teeth. He did not need the super to call his attention to the fact that a "lapped meet"—that bugaboo of all railroad men—might be imminent. His thoughts flew to the Pullman coach on the head-end of Twelve—the section wherein rested his wife and little daughter.

His face grew gray as with trembling fingers he continued to send the useless "B-x! B-x!"

Neil Rice, fearful of unnerving the man before him, forebore mentioning the terrible possibilities. Instead, his active mind considered the chances of averting a collision. He knew that it was too late to stop Twelve, for the Mail had already left Fabian, and there was no other all-night station between there and the point where it should pass the side-tracked freight. And then a thought occurred to him. There was a small station to the westward of Brixton, where nightly card parties had been the fashion. The operator, the agent, and some town cronies were wont to gather in the office of the station, and there lose their beauty-sleep over the pasteboards.

True, it was late—almost too late to reasonably expect an answer. Still there was a chance. Rice laid a hand on the despatcher's shoulder.

"Call up that bunch of pinochle sharps at Spencer Hills," he said. "Ask 'em if they've seen anything of Seven."

Barely had MacDonald sounded the Spencer Hills call thrice ere he got the "i-i, i-i," of the operator who was turning night into day. Opening his key, Billy rattled off the inquiry. With fingers that trembled perceptibly he closed the key and listened for the message that would tell him whether or not his worst fears were to be realized.

A noisy switch engine clanged past the window. With an oath, Rice slammed down the sash, and near-silence reigned. Even the chattering relays ceased their clicking. It seemed as if every one along the line were listening in. The incessant and fruitless calls for "b-x," the inquiry just made of Spencer Hills, were incidents unusual enough to attract the attention of every night man along the division.

And then the message came. Slowly, distinctly, each click spelling disaster, the platinum points of the despatcher's sounder registered the movements of the fingers of the man at Spencer Hills. The white-faced men, mouths open, every nerve and fiber of their bodies strained to the utmost tension, read dot by dot, dash by dash:

S-e-v-e-n p-a-s-s-e-d h-e-r-e t-h-r-e-e o-r f-o-u-r m-i-n-u-t-e-s a-g-o. W-a-s l-i-s-t-e-n-i-n-g t-o ——

With a cry of compassion—an almost inarticulate sound tinged with horror—Rice leaped for the board and opened the key. With a firm yet gentle touch he brushed the dazed despatcher aside.

"I'll sit in, Billy, lad," said he. "I'll attend to the rest of it."

MacDonald buried his face in his hands. Needles—white-hot needles—seemed to be boring their way into his overtaxed brain. Like a man writhing in a horrible nightmare he heard Rice order out the wrecker. He heard the drowsy call-boy clatter out to assemble the crew. He heard the jangle of the telephone as the two Lurline doctors were summoned. He heard the tense voice of his relief as he came rushing in and put a startled question to the super.

And then a dry-eyed sob burst from the tortured man. He raised his face and clenched his fists. In his desperation he addressed the Master Despatcher, the One in the hollow of Whose palms all trains and human destinies rest.

"God!" burst from the parched lips of the husband and father, "Great God! It's all off—unless You take a hand Yourself!"

IN AN upper berth in the forward Pullman attached to eastbound Twelve lay sleeping a woman and a child—MacDonald's wife and daughter. Daylight hours aboard the speeding train had disclosed the fact that the woman was still in her early thirties, that she possessed a certain degree of charm and grace, which, flavored by an air of dignity and firmness, gave to her the appearance of being a person

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who had both loved and suffered deeply.

Now, with a precious letter stowed safely away in the clothes-net beside her, she was dreaming of the seven lean years behind her, of the good years to come. Until exhaustion had overcome her, till sleep had closed her brown eyes, she had lain awake listening to the click-clack of the wheels over rails, frogs and points.

"Back to Bill! Back to Bill! Back to Billy!" the wheels had sung to her as the Mail tore through the night.

Now, exhausted by the wear and fatigue induced by two sleepless nights, Margaret MacDonald slept soundly.

But it was otherwise with the eleven-year-old at her side. Bertha fidgetted and fussed in her sleep. It was hardly due to the anticipation of seeing soon her father—the "Daddy" she could not remember. As a matter of fact her restlessness was due to two certain green apples which had been handed to her several hours before by a big, black man wearing silver buttons on his uniform.

Unseen by her mother she had eaten the small green apples so different in appearance from the big red ones in the train-boy's basket. How should a girl brought up in California know that Missouri apples are not good in July?

And now, as she squirmed and wiggled in uncomfortable sleep, her dream-thoughts fell upon her Daddy. He seemed to be stretching out his arms to her. A look of distress was on his face. He seemed to be calling to her.

The girl sat up. Her gray eyes were shut tight, but she could still see her father's outstretched arms. The child swept aside the velvet curtain and swung her legs out over the aisle. She sat erect on the edge of the berth and held out her arms to the man she knew was the "naughty father" her mother's brother had so often told her about.

The distressed face of the vision receded. The outstretched arms grew dim and indistinct. The child leaned out over the aisle. She stretched out her arms to the utmost. Farther and farther she leaned out, until a slight lurch of the flying train overbalanced her. She felt herself slipping. A swaying cord—a smooth round cord—touched her fingers. Quickly, intuitively, she clutched the cord with all her strength.

Out over the green-carpeted aisle she swung. The cord sagged under the seventy-pound weight of her body, and Bertha, her fingers relaxing under the strain, fell softly to the floor of the coach.

At the pull of the cord, a gong clanged harshly in the engine-cab four coaches ahead. Ham Nason swore softly as with one gloved hand he closed the throttle, while the other felt for the air-valve.

With clashing bumpers and screaming brake-shoes Twelve came to a full stop. Lanterns flashed alongside the cab and soon the air was full of accusations and denials. Watches flashed forth and the rear brakeman ran back the track to the prescribed distance.

"Nobody pulled the cord. Y're dreaming!" the angry conductor was saying for the third time to the equally angry engineman, when an ominous pencil of light stole around the curve at the base of the hill far ahead.

The fireman saw the light first. With a cry of alarm he sprang for the cab. The light grew brighter and brighter as the locomotive ahead described its arc and straightened out headed directly for Twelve.

"Seven by all that's holy!" roared Nason as he clambered up the gangway.

His gloved fingers trembled as he released the air and tugged at the Johnson bar. He jerked open the throttle a notch. The massive drivers showered sparks as they bit into the steel rails at the mouth of the sand-pipes. Faster and faster coughed the exhaust of the ten-wheeler; her connecting rods rose and fell with steadily increasing rapidity; and yet the horrible white eye up the single track loomed larger and larger.

But Ferguson was doing his share, too. With thousands of tons of freight sliding him onward and onward toward the retreating "Mail," he still stuck to his post and sand-valve.

There came the moment when both engine crews closed their eyes. A shock followed, and the air was full of flying splinters. Then, with locked and shattered pilots, the two engines ground their way joltingly to a halt.

IT SEEMED a matter of ages since the wrecker pulled out and he had been forbidden to accompany it. Scarcely able to believe his own sense of hearing, Despatcher MacDonald raised his head and listened to the glad tidings.

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"Safe and sound, Billy Boy," Neil Rice was saying as he swung off the tool-car and clapped MacDonald on the shoulder.

"Didn't you get the news from above?" he went on to ask, simultaneously waving a thumb in the direction of the room where the lights still burned brightly.

Billy shook his head.

"Couldn't bear to stay there," he confessed. "Tell me—where are they?" he went on to ask.

"They'll be here aboard Twelve in just about ten minutes," said Rice.

"And how many were inj——?"

"Nonsense, man!" the super interrupted. "There wasn't any collision—that is, none worth speaking about. Fifty dollars damages. Just shock enough to throw your little girl out of her berth. Somebody pulled the cord. Nason stopped. They saw Seven bowling along toward 'em, and backed up. When we got there there was little to do. We found Reardon getting over an epileptic fit. It came on at the wrong time for him. That finishes his railroading days."

"But who stopped Twelve?" asked Billy. "Who got the hunch to pull the cord?"

"God knows!" said the super not irreverently.

And ten minutes later, in the gray of the morning, MacDonald pressed to his breast the woman he had twice so nearly lost. Then he picked up and kissed the girl who ate the green apples.

The KALZAS HOODOO

A TALE OF DAWSON DAYS

By Samuel Alexander White

Author of "Proof," "The Azoic Law," etc.

THE Lost Kalzas Vein had ever been a lure to the men of the Yukon, but it had also been a hoodoo. Disaster had always smitten the searchers for it going or coming, and when Tom Bassett and Eric Sark elected to go forth upon the quest, the old-timers of Dawson City shook their heads and gravely predicted for them repose in the frozen gravel.

The Kalzas Vein, they said, was a myth come down out of the fastnesses of the Yukon's earliest years. Old Kalem Kalzas, dead and disintegrated long before the days of Jack McQuesten, was reputed to be the man who staked it and after whom it had been named, but what it was, quartz, placer, copper, iron or coal, old Kalem had never told. Nor had he told where he had staked. Yet the story went that it was in the heart

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of the Kalzas Mountains, in a chasm called Kalzas Cañon, and some made so bold as to give the description of the cañon which old Kalem was supposed to have handed down.

The cañon, so the description ran, was a blind and narrow one, extending north and south, and the walls of it were sheer, unscalable walls over one thousand feet high. It could be known if ever come upon by its landmarks, an unbroken circle of ten ice-scarred peaks far over its northern wall and a funnel-shaped pass, obviously named Kalzas Pass, leading out of it on the south. Furthermore, the cañon lay just above timberline, the ore body occupied its whole narrow bed, and the ore, whatever it was, was rich enough to ransom the earth.

And the anomaly of it was that with so accurate a description the place had never been located. Numbers had tried for it, boring into the chaotic heart of the Kalzas Range and questing weeks on end, but those who went never came back to tell whether a later generation of men had construed old Kalem's words. With some it had been starvation, with others altitude, with yet others wind-felled pine, precipice brink, bad rapid, ice-run or the fangs of dogs.

The only man who had ever gone forth and returned in the face of the hoodoo was Teslin Albert, and he had not been one of the searchers proper but had only acted the part of mountain guide.

Teslin Albert was a Teslin Indian turned white, who had taken on with the white man's wisdom none of his virtues and all of his vices. He was a guide by profession, but only from choice, for he had the wealth of a dozen Bonanza and Eldorado Kings and claims on every creek. He was to the present generation almost as mysterious a character as old Kalem Kalzas had been to the past. Rumor said that he, like Kalem, had discovered a secret placer in the hills and had gone Kalem one better by managing to live on and work it. Others claimed such a supposition was idiotic, that Teslin Albert was far too lazy to toil, that the only thing he was good for was guiding and that he had made his hoard simply by colossal pyramiding in the Klondike creek gamble.

Teslin Albert, Sark and Bassett had never seen or talked with. They sought him out in his haunts before they started on their quest, but he had gone no one knew where on a guiding trip, and so they had to proceed without more definite information than the rumors all men bandied about.

Still they did not proceed rashly. They had had experience with hoodoos before and gained a mighty respect for them. They exercised due caution throughout the one hundred and seventy-five miles of the Yukon River journey to Selkirk and also out of Selkirk up the Pelly River, and in all those miles no untoward incident happened in their daily routine until they reached the big cut-off on the Pelly, just below the mouth of the Macmillan River.

At the end of the cut-off, Bassett who was breaking trail for the dog-team halted abruptly on the dip of the snowy bank and shot one arm forward like a leveled rifle.

"WHAT'S yon, Eric?" he demanded. "What's yon on the Pelly ice? A bear?"

"No, Tom, no bear!" concluded Sark staring. "If I'm not gone snow-blind and erratic I believe it's men."

"*Men!* But thar ain't nobody gone up the Pelly ahead of us this Winter. Severil told us so at Selkirk. And 'sides, I don't see no outfit."

"Still it's men," reasserted Sark, gazing through his cupped hands as through a pair of field glasses. "Two befurred men. Evidently making camp. One of them seems to be lying down. By thunder, no—knocked down! Must be, for the other's rifling his pack. Run, partner, run like blazes!"

Sark's whip cracked around the legs of his five huskies, and close on Bassett's heels the team bolted down the steep snow-smothered incline. About them the fluffy stuff went up like vapor till they hit the river ice, and then they slid floundering along on their sides. For the Pelly's surface was clean glare-ice, bluish-green in color and polished as smooth as a waxed floor with the brush of the Winter wind.

The dogs slid for yards before Eric could get the outfit halted and straightened out, but finally he succeeded in heading them after Bassett. Tom had slipped his heels from the loops of his snowshoes in his descent and cast them upon the sled.

Eric followed suit, twisting his feet in air as he ran, so that first his right snowshoe and then his left clattered upon the ice ahead of him and was picked up without slackening speed. In their moccasins they made faster time, and the dogs, rejoicing in

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the freedom from friction on the sled runners, hurled the load up-river like a missile.

The sounds of their coming, the thud of their moccasined feet and the buzzing roar of the sled upon the ice carried to the scene of trouble. The man, hunched over the prostrate body of his companion, leaped violently erect to find himself all but overridden by Sark's and Bassett's outfit.

"What in blazes is the matter here?" demanded Tom, his fiery glance sweeping the pig-eyed, swarthy native face and passing down to the still figure of the white man on the ice. "What'd you kill him for?"

"Me no kill um," denied the Indian vehemently, cringing and making protesting gestures. "Um die no grub. Us starved all way from um Macmillan Mountains."

"Starved?" echoed Bassett.

He approached the white man who lay face down and went to turn his head for examination. The whole body, solidly frozen, turned with the head, and the man now lay upon his back with his emaciated, stiffened mask of a face turned upward to the Wintry sky. His half-open eyes were terribly inflamed and full of frozen matter, and his whole face was seared as with intense and repeated frost-bite.

"Great Heavens!" ejaculated Bassett, looking in awe at his partner. "You ever seen anythin' like that, Eric?"

"No, Tom," admitted Sark, "I've seen snow-blindness and frost-bite all my life, but I never saw them as bad as that."

"*Is* it snow-blindness?" asked Tom incredulously. "*Is* it frost-bite? Whar in tarnation'd he git sich a dose?"

"Us 'mong glaciers," the Indian volunteered. He pointed to the zenith to indicate great altitude. " 'Way up straight high!"

"Then why ain't you touched, too?" demanded Bassett. "Your eyes is all right, and your flesh is all right. And, you slinkin' Siwash, you look suspiciously full-bodied for a starvin' man!"

"Um snow-glare and um frost don't hit Indian like um white mans," explained the native fearfully. "And me no Siwash dog. Me honest Teslin, clean and strong. Me stand um trail without much grub. White mans um not strong. No stand um—die!"

"What's his name?" Sark interjected.

"Him name Sagum. George um call—George Sagum."

"And what's he doing up here?"

"Hunt um gold. Macmillan Mountains. No find. Me guide um. Me Teslin Albert."

"Ho-ho!" exclaimed Sark. "You're Teslin Albert, eh?"

There was a brief pause while the partners significantly fathomed each other's eyes.

"But this is irritatin' funny," spoke Bassett. "Look here, Teslin, we got reason to believe we're the only ones on the Pelly so far this Winter. Severil, the Selkirk trader, told us nary a one had gone up-river before us."

"Us not come up Pelly," asserted Teslin. "Sagum come on um Livingstone Creek placer-camp and hire me guide um Macmillans. Us go over on um Big Salmon, up to Quiet Lake, up um McConnell River and over um divide to um Pelly. Then us come down um Pelly to mouth um Macmillan and up Macmillan."

"Humph! That's it, eh? You speak honest, Teslin, though your face is agin you. And since you've explained so much, mebbe you kin explain the robbin' stunt likewise. Don't deny it! We seen you. We seen you with your hands in the dead man's pack."

"Me only take um pack," protested Teslin. "Me no steal. What for me steal? Me got hundreds um claims. Me only take um pack back to camp him came from. What good leave um here?"

"Well, it's your ideer agin ours, I guess," returned Bassett grudgingly. "But his attitood was sure ghoulish, wasn't it, Eric?"

"That's the way it struck me, partner. And, Teslin, I want to question you about the grub. Sagum knew where he was going. He knew how long it would take and the difficulties he would encounter. Why was there no grub for the back-trip? Did he go short like a fool and depend on game?"

"Us take lots," enlightened Teslin. "Us cache um all 'long Macmillan for back-trip, but when us come back us find um hell-bad wolverines rob um all."

"Whar was the last cache you hit?" Bassett shot at him.

Teslin wavered. His pig-eyes avoided those of the partners.

"Me forget um sure."

"No you don't, you ornery cuss! You know whar it is as well as you know whar the Teslin River is, and your hull story stands or falls by it. If you don't spit out the location of that cache we'll know you're

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lyin', and then, by thunder, rich or not rich, you'll go down to Dawson City to the Mounted Police and face the consequences. Whar was that last cache before you hit the Pelly?"

Teslin's pig-eyes came back to Tom's.

"Um just below um mouth Kalzas River," he answered reluctantly.

"All right," snapped Bassett, "we'll make that by night with the swift goin'. And we may as well take Sagum back with us that far. We'll examine the cache and arrive at our own concloosions. Meantime, Teslin, you better go unarmed. Jist slip your rifle under them sled-lashin's!"

THEY swung on up the Pelly, swerved to the left into the Macmillan and held on for the broad valley between the Macmillan Mountains and the Kalzas Range where the Kalzas River came down, and at evening, a half-mile or so below the mouth of the Kalzas, Teslin Albert pointed out the location of the cache.

"See um spruce!" he indicated. "Trees on top mouth cañon. Cache in um mouth cañon."

From the river ice they turned over the snow-covered rocks to the gaping walls of the gorge, and there pulled up by a scattered heap of stones interspersed with the old tracks of Sagum and the Indian.

"Um well-built," lamented Teslin, "but um bad wolverines—you know um! Um find um no matter where um put, and um go through cast-iron."

"Looks like wolverines all right," admitted Bassett. "So I guess we was wrong, Teslin. Thar ain't no evidence to refute what you say. You must be honest, and since you're poor and outa employment, and me and my pardner's on a hunt for metal ourselves, we'll jist hire you here and now at Sagum's wage. And about Sagum! We kin't give him ground burial 'less we waste a lot of time thawin', and if we use the cache the wolverines'll treat him the same as the grub. Tharfore we'll jist hoist him into a spruce. He'll keep thar till we come back this way and take him down to Selkirk for decent plantin'."

It was unobtrusively spoken, but Teslin Albert read the meaning under Bassett's words. That meaning was that Tom was not fully satisfied, that he was going to favor the Indian with suspended sentence and keep him under his eye till Sagum's body could be taken down and an investigation commenced on their return to Selkirk, and although Teslin did not like the decree he was in no position to show his objection.

"Sure um hire," he agreed. "Start work now. Make um camp."

While he made ready the camp and cooked supper, Tom and Eric prepared Sagum for burial. This was a simple matter. They rolled him in the folds of an old canvas supply-sack and bound the canvas about with rope.

Sark climbed up a young, limber spruce till his weight began to tell and the top bent to the ground. Bassett on the ground attached the ropes that bound the canvas to the spruce-top. Then Eric dropped out of mid-air, and the tree bearing the lighter Sagum straightened up.

Supper was quickly disposed of and the dogs fed, and for a short time the three smoked about the fire. But the communion of the pipe was no inspiration to conversation. The partners tried to vaguely bring up the legend of the Kalzas Vein and to get Teslin Albert to talk about it, but with little success.

"Think old Kalem's holdin's'll ever be found, Teslin?" was Bassett's boldest try.

"Um ain't nowhere," shrugged Teslin decisively. "Only blame fool story!"

And they could get no more comment out of him. With his short pipe in his teeth, his plug of black tobacco in one hand and his silver match-box, mark of his plethoric riches, in the other, he sat silent by the fire till it was time to roll up. Then he spread his blankets at the back of the camp space, away from the partners and away from the heat of the fire.

"Teslin, you ought to learn to be sociable," observed Sark as he and Tom spread their own coverings near the coals. "And you sure must be warm-blooded. My partner and I can never get too close to the fire."

Before slipping into the blankets, Bassett put all the rifles and grub between himself and Sark, stationed the sled at their feet and tied the dogs to the sled.

Teslin would no doubt bolt if he got the chance. So Tom wasn't giving him the chance. He knew Teslin could not lay hand to any of the necessities of life or travel in the wilderness without waking him or Eric.

Teslin knew it, too.

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That was why he departed empty-handed in the middle of the night.

SARK was the first to miss him when he rolled out at morning.

"He's suicided, Tom!" he yelled, shaking his partner. "Gone without grub or weapon!"

"Then the geezer was guilty," concluded Tom, rubbing his eyes and staring at the deserted spot at the back of the camp space where Teslin had pretended sleep. "And his mental process was that he might as well starve in the snows as tighten a noose with his neck. Wonder what in tarnation he had agin Sagum?"

"We'll never know," replied Sark, "for if Teslin's ever found he won't be able to tell. But we can't worry over either of them. If this Kalzas hoodoo holds we're likely to have enough worries of our own before we get back down the Pelly again. So let's hammer ahead. You fry the bacon this morning, Tom, will you? I don't believe my eyes'll stand the smoke. I think I have a touch of snow-blindness."

"That so, pardner?" asked Bassett quickly. "I was jist thinkin' I had a trace myself. My eyes is prickin' too."

"Oh, well, never mind, Tom! I'll fry——"

"No, you won't, either," declared Bassett firmly. Stepping up, he examined Sark's eyes. "Yours is worse'n mine. They're sure inflamed, Eric, and your cheeks is frost-bit into the bargain."

"You're smirched yourself, Tom, if you're looking for frost-bite!" Eric laid the point of his finger on Bassett's chin. "Your skin's angry red."

"I never felt it yesterday," spoke Tom, puzzled. "It kin't be frost-bite. But still, now I look close at yours, it's jist like Sagum's, and your eyes is somethin' like his, only in a slight degree. It's either frost-bite or—this cussed Kalzas hoodoo!"

"Don't mention things like that, partner! Sure as you mention them they fasten on to you. Whether it's due to your imagination and its influence on your course or not I don't know, but they fasten just the same."

"Very good, I ain't mentionin' it. I'm only statin' that you got a worse touch of snow-blindness and frost-scar'n me, Eric, and mebbe we better lay up a day or two till your optics is right."

"Like thunder we will! Time counts on this hunt, and we aren't going to fritter it away in luxuries. I'll be all right. We'll both be all right. We'll bathe the eyes in tea, and plaster our faces with charcoal to kill the refraction of the light."

Breakfast was eaten in silence, and the outfit mushed out on the Macmillan ice. Just as they swung up the mouth of the tributary Kalzas, Bassett stopped short and stared at some snow-impressions on the left limit of the stream.

"The cussed fool!" he exclaimed. "He's either gone loco or lost all the Indian part of his natoor. He had an all-night start and any of four streams of clean glare ice, the up-Macmillan, the down-Macmillan, the stream that flows outa Kalzas Lake and the main Kalzas itself to travel on 'thout leavin' a track, and here he has to walk on the bank. Eric, he's sure degenerated into an out-and-out white, and it's our bounden duty to foller him in the interests of law and jestice."

They diverged upon the tracks, but the tracks did not lead far.

Five hundred yards through the spruce they ran into a stone cache all tramped around with lacy new tracks of snowshoes, with the stones freshly pulled apart and scattered about in the drifts.

"The wily wastrel!" blurted Bassett. "He ain't sich a guiney as I took him for. But he's a worse fiend than either of us suspected. Eh, Eric?"

"He certainly is, Tom," answered Sark, compressing his lips as he surveyed the scene and read its significance. "He's a proper devil! Of course yon first cache he showed us was the original cache, the one Sagum built himself, and here's the spot where Teslin sneaked out and secretly transferred its contents. He didn't do it only once. The condition of Sagum is enough to show that he did it all along the in-trail, and he did it so Sagum would never come back alive. But why did the human Beelzebub do it?"

"I dunno, Eric. Mebbe he found out Sagum was on to his secret placer. That Kalzas hoodoo is sure workin', pardner, and I'm beginnin' to see it incarnated in that son of a Teslin hootch. But thar's no mentionin' them things, and thar's no followin' the mania-ed Mee-fisto-kleez either. See his tracks yonder, curvin' back to the river agin! As I said before he has the

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up-Macmillan, the down-Macmillan, the Kalzas Lake outlet of the Kalzas River itself for his boolevard, all snowless glare-ice. So thar's no further digression possible for this outfit. We're keepin' arter yon mythical Kalzas Vein."

Days and days they kept after it.

THEY passed the branch of the Kalzas which drained Kalzas Lake, lying to the northwestward among the Macmillan Mountains, and went on up the Kalzas over the sixty-third parallel.

There they swung back west by south up a small tributary which descended between the spur of the Kalzas Mountains, topped by Clark Peak and the main range itself.

The headwaters of the creek landed them at a point near the crossing of the sixty-third parallel and the one hundred and thirty-fifth meridian. At this stage they abandoned their sled on account of the precipitous travel, back-packed their dogs with fifty-pound loads, took double that weight upon their own backs and cut into the heart of the Kalzas Range upon their mythical quest.

They had no rational plan to go on, and truly they could not have followed such a plan had they had one. About them was a bewildering chaos of cañons, divides, spurs and cross-ranges, wherein and whereon they wandered back and forth through glacial atmospheres, mountain storms and terrific frosts. Taking the supposition that old Kalem's Vein was gold, they strove to solve the maze and figure out where gold concentration was likely to take place.

But it was all a jumble, a travesty of mountain formation, a cosmic muddle. Here the Titan carver of the icy peaks had hewn haphazard with his ax, splitting the great barrier of rock into grotesque shapes and littering the whole region with the gigantic rubble of his toil.

Tom and Eric could make nothing of it, could strike no reasonable topographical trend which might result in reefs or ledges or even pockets. Blind cañons running north and south they struck in plenty, but none of them was the cañon they sought. Some were just about timber-line, yet either the timber or the rock formation did not suit. The timber was always higher up than the bed of the cañon, the peaks to the north did not correspond or else the funnel-shaped pass to the south was not there at all.

Still, whatever cañon they struck they surface-prospected it on the chance. Their search ran into weeks, and they arrived reluctantly at the day of giving up.

"But first we'll try yon short cross-range to the eastward, Eric," proposed Bassett. "Yes, the one as must throw the streamlets down on Moose Creek."

"It'll be no good, Tom," Sark forecasted. "We'll never find our cañon there. It's so high that there'll be no peaks surrounding it, and since it's an offshoot of the mother range there'll be no pass to the south. Besides, its plagued hazardous to cross its face. Those tips have been smoking for days, and we've seen more than one slide go down."

"Thar's no wind now, pardner. Everythin's hangin' stiff, and we'll make it all right. It's the only thing left. We'd never be satisfied if we went away now without a crack at her. It'd worry us all our lives. We'd always think the Kalzas Vein might 'a' bin thar, and we'd always be cussin' ourselves for not takin' a root at it. If we go up and see that she ain't thar, then we kin let her go to Heligoland and die happy."

"Yes, but the trouble is we might die too soon in our happiness. However, if you want to risk it, go ahead. Only, we cache the rifles, grub, outfit and dogs right here out of harm's way. You can't tell what's going to happen the next minute on these peaks."

They went up past ancient glacier faces and old moraines that had been there since the beginning of time. They climbed high above timber-line and quested north along the face of the cross-range, peering below for cañons which might possibly answer the description of Kalzas Cañon.

Halfway across, a puff of wind caught them, no normal up-springing mountain breeze but a glacial breath, rushing like a solid wall and caused by some enormous caving of the ice leviathans in the distance. For an instant it staggered Sark and Bassett on their precarious footing, and as they fought for their balance, wind-dislodged snow poured on them from above.

"Snow-slide, Eric, snow-slide!" yelled Tom. "Look——"

The next second he and Sark were swept downward together.

Luckily for them they were above timber-line, and luckily for them also there was no slide-rock overhanging. The roaring torrent was wholly composed of fluffy new

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snow which had lodged upon the icy steeps during the last week. In a white, foaming mælstrom it enveloped them. Like men caught in a bursting cataract they sped down, feet first, head first, now buried in the creamy, undulating waves, now gasping back their breath upon the spumy surface.

They whizzed over a high palisade and landed with a sickening drop in a pocket drift below. The snow poured upon them and passed on down the sloping side of the pocket into the chasm bed beneath, and flailing with their hands and treading with their feet, they literally swam upon its ever-rising surface to keep from being buried.

With mad convulsions they maintained their position on the surface, and when the torrent subsided their shoulders were level with the rim of the pocket. They pulled themselves out on the rocks and lay there breathing spasmodically and worming the snow out of ears, eyes, mouths and nostrils.

"HECTIC Heavens!" breathed Sark, when he got his throat hawked clear. "That feathery stuff hits like lead. Good job for us, partner, that she was only a small slide. And good job we cached the huskies and the outfit. Are you rock-bruised much?"

But Bassett was not considering his bruises. He was staring upward.

"Thunderation!" he shrilled. "Look at this cañon, will you?"

Sark raised his eyes to the walls about them.

They sheered up straight and unscalable for over one thousand feet. He looked at the head of the cañon. It was blind. Above the solid wall of it he glimpsed an unbroken circlet of ten ice-scarred peaks. Nervously he jerked his eyes south and gazed into the gap of a narrow tortuous pass, flanked by stupendous palisades.

"By the totems of the Thinglets!" he gasped. "Kalzas Cañon, or I'm hootch-eyed and delirious! And so narrow you'd never find it unless you fell into it. That's what we've done. We've plumped from top to bottom, Tom, on to the feather-bed in this pocket, and the vein must be right below us. Come on, partner! Come on down where the snow peters out!"

He dashed recklessly along the rim of the pocket, stumbled over slide-rock at the imminent risk of breaking his legs and descended to the bottom of the cañon proper. Bassett was racing behind him, and as they rushed along, the walls about them shot ever higher and higher to meet the gates of Kalzas Pass.

Farther up the cañon there was no snow. The height of the palisades at that end shut out all horizontal drifting and descending avalanches, and the natural perpendicular fall could not remain on account of the draft of the pass which sucked it out when the great winds blew as through a giant funnel.

The bed of the cañon lay bare. It was high in the center, depressed at both sides. In these depressions lay a muddle of timber, piled in heaps like straw, spruce trunks a century or more old but perfectly preserved in the perpetual frost, evidence that timber-line had formerly extended above the cañon and that much of the growth had been swept down by avalanches before vegetation finally gave up the struggle against the encroaching glaciers and retired farther down the range.

It was upon this elevated central portion that the partners' eyes were fixed as they pounded along. The configuration was barely traceable at the lower limits of the snow-slide, but farther down in the clean rocky bed it came up sharply, and Tom and Eric beheld a gigantic vein of some sort, writhing like a huge python through all the cañon's length.

"By the shade of ancient Kalem!" shrieked Bassett. "The Kalzas Vein! Look at the size of it. But what is it, Eric? What in thunderation is it?"

He dropped upon his knees upon the central portion and swiftly scraped away the loose rubble of slide-rock.

"Ain't quartzy, so it kin't be gold. Ain't raw copper neither, nor coal, nor yet iron. And it sure ain't any mother lode of placer. Pardner, what in tarnation is it?"

"You've got me half-Nelsoned, Tom!" exclaimed Sark, chipping pieces with the belt-ax he snatched from under his mackinaw. "I ought to know that ore. I've seen it before, but I can't name it now. But we'll soon know when we get back to where we cached our outfit and put it in the crucible. Stake, Tom, stake! Whatever it is it's worth millions, or so many men wouldn't have died for it. I'll give you a hand in a minute if I can find a pocket left to put this sample into."

The rolling down the mountainside had

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ripped Sark's mackinaws so that the pockets were not fit to hold anything. He explored them in vain and finally fell back on the silver match-box which he carried in a compartment of his leather money-belt. Emptying it of the matches which he gave to Tom, he slipped the dirty-colored, shale-like pieces he had chipped into the silver receptacle and buttoned it back in his belt.

"All hipped and heeled, partner!" he exulted, jumping up. "Where are your stakes? Let's jam them in and get back. I'm delirious to analyze the stuff and find out what it is."

Bassett had chipped some slabs from the old spruce logs and sharpened their ends. He tapped one into a near-by crevice, and together the men paced down the writhing vein. Just as they took the final stride for their measurement, Tom stubbed his moccasined toe upon a spruce snag in the rocks.

"Condemnation!" he growled recoiling.

He danced upon one foot, wiggled his toe in pain and butted resentfully at the snag with the bottom of his heel.

But the snag held, and his partner stooped and curiously examined it.

"It's been driven, Tom!" he exploded.

"Driven?" echoed Bassett incredulously.

"Sure driven!"

Sark breathed upon the face of the stake and scratched away a loosened film of ice with his thumb-nail.

Underneath the film their amazed eyes read the inscription:

GEORGE SAGUM—DECEMBER 5TH
960—540

"The son of a Teslin hootch's secret placer—and identical with old Kalem's Vein!" blurted Tom, staring. "Sagum was none so slow to find it, but the poor feller died before filin' his claim. Teslin lied like purgatory about bein' in the Macmillan Mountains. Wouldn't that fumigate you, Eric? Only it ain't placer. Sagum knowed that much. He wasn't any wiser'n we are as to its make-up, so he jist compromised on quartz dimensions same as we're doin'."

"Yes," nodded Sark, "and he must have published his mission at the start. Teslin Albert knew he was going after the Kalzas Vein, and then the Kalzas country hoodoo started working. Tom, I'm like you. I'm beginning to see that hoodoo incarnated in that——"

"Stop, pardner, stop!" appealed Bassett earnestly. "We're in a rotten-looking mountain-trap here, and don't you go mentionin' them things. Come on—" he plucked out Sagum's stake and hammered in his own—"let's git through the pass. And when we come back agin we'll tote spells with us and a gang of Chilcats that's hoodoo-proof."

BELOW them the cañon twisted S-shape before opening into the pass. They swung around the first bend of the S and ran without warning upon a half-dozen Indian tepees planted fairly upon the top of the dirty-colored vein.

"Flabbergastation!" gritted Sark harshly. "Previous locators, eh? But I don't see any stakes."

"They ain't staked," decided Bassett, casting about with keen eyes. "A stuffed poke agin a tin of bakin'-powder they dunno what they's on, and thar ain't no necessity for us to enlighten 'em. Wonder what tribe they belong to?"

Pulling up a closed tepee-flap as he spoke, Bassett entered without ceremony.

Sark followed at his back, and at their intrusion four bucks, three squaws and two papooses sprang pell-mell up from around the fire in the center and rushed upon them.

Instinctively Tom and Eric threw themselves into an attitude of defense, but then they saw that the whole nine were blind, snow-blind from the appearance of their eyes, and that their coppery faces were blotched with the scars of seeming frost-bite.

Mumbling unfamiliar jargon, they surrounded the partners, wheedling, moaning, crying; calling upon them in signs from the depths of their abject misery to act the rôle of saviors. And the instant their clamor arose the other tepees immediately spilled their contents into the first, and Tom and Eric were swamped in a wild mob of over two score fur-clad natives, every squaw's whelp of them blind and disfigured by the awful scars.

"Distilled essence of hoodooes!" Bassett exclaimed, striving vainly to keep them back and to interpret their jargon. "I kin't make anythin' of 'em. What are they, pardner, Pellys?"

"Must be part of the Kalzas tribe," decided Sark, "an offshoot of the Pellys. They haven't been seen in years. Their lingo

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beats me, too. I wonder where they've been to get in this condition? I'm going to try some sign talk on them and find out."

Singling out one who appeared to be the chief, Sark drew him to the opening of the tepee and turned his face to the sun.

Although it was only a Winter sun, a pale orb without strength hanging like a harvest moon in the gap of the Southern Pass, the Kalzas Indian winced under its light. Eric laid gentle fingers against his eyes to indicate snow-blindness and swiftly drew him inside again. Then he fished out some of the snow that had lodged inside his German socks and rubbed it against the native's cheek to indicate frost-bite.

The old Kalzas buck caught Sark's meaning.

He vigorously shook his head. He touched the snow in Eric's hand and held out his own hand, palm down at shoulder height, stabbed an uncertain finger down the mountainside, scraped the bare rock whereon the tepee stood and tapped the tepee walls itself. Then he lifted the tepee flap, pointed out where the dead spruce timber lay piled many feet deep and blindly indicated the fire, the fur blankets beside it and the plentiful supply of moose meat in the tepee corners.

And finally he held up both hands, with the fingers extended, twice.

"Snow five feet deep down the mountainside, Tom," translated Sark, "so they came up here into the cañon for comfort and shelter. They're not snow-blind, and they're not frost-bitten either. They haven't been anywhere to get that way. They've been lying in the tepees doing nothing but firing up and filling their bellies for twenty days."

"Then what in perdition is it?" demanded Bassett, a shade of fear, fear of the unknown, crossing his imperturbable face. "Sagum had it. This hull tribe has it. We had a touch of it ourselves on the Macmillan River, and by thunder, I believe—yes, sir, my eyes is smartin' now. The bloody stuff's catchin'. Your cheeks is reddenin', too, jist like they was before. Hold on! You don't need to say it! I see it in your eyes, and I kin feel the spot on my chin a-burnin'. Say, pardner, what is the —— thing? A plague?"

"I don't for the scalp of me know," replied Sark, his face setting gravely as he looked on the grotesque, horrible pageant of suffering around him, "but it's something deadly bad, Tom. We haven't much to combat it, yet we got to use what we have. There's iodine in the medicine-kit back at the cache. It's the only thing I can think of now. Let's go and fetch it."

As they went to step out, the mob about them surged forward with moaning protests, blindly striving to bar their exit, but Eric managed by signs to impart their mission to the chief, and he called his people off.

"It's bubonic itch or consolidated erysipelas or somethin' worse," diagnosed Bassett, once they were outside. "It's my private opinion this cañon's a cemetery right now and thar ain't a cussed thing to be done for 'em. Eric, I wisht to thunder we wasn't goin' back!"

"So do I, Tom," confessed Sark.

Yet, though their spirits were going down in the face of the intangible menace as the barometer goes down before a storm, they knew that in the white man's nature of them they would go back.

"And if it ain't itch or erysipelas, pardner," Tom went on a moment later, "it's a somber cuss and a soopernatooral visitation. How kin two plain men buck that?"

Sark did not answer. They twisted around the second curve of the S in the cañon and straight up in the notch of the pass another tepee, square-built, blurred upon their vision.

"More of them stricken, I figger, pardner!" breathed Bassett. "Kalzas Cañon is sure gittin' to be a popular resort in its old age. But why ain't they with the rest?"

"Explore me, Tom! And just go slow. I never saw a Pelly with a tepee built like that."

PANTHER-FOOTED, the two crept over the bare rocks. As they drew near the camp they saw it was not a tepee at all but a canvas fly.

They went down on their bellies and did not come up again till they could almost touch the fly. Then they arose, tense, leaned forward and peered around either end to see Teslin Albert sitting smoking by his fire.

Out of the corner of his eye Teslin caught the loom of something and jumped, but Tom and Eric had jumped a fraction of a second sooner.

The three went down in a heap, Sark upon Teslin's legs and Tom upon his shoulders, jamming his face into the dead ashes about his fire.

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"You unexpoorgated edition of sin!" anathematized Tom. "It's Dawson Barracks and a hemp cravat for you. Got any gun? A-ha! Thar was an extry one in your secret cache, eh? Well, we'll jist confiscate it and thar won't be no call to trouble ourselves holdin' you. Stand up and stand on the inside of the pass. You kin't git by us 'cause we're only goin' acrost the moraine a piece. You try it, and we'll plug you swift."

Sullenly Teslin Albert shook himself together and began to pour forth protestations of his innocence, but Bassett stopped him short.

"Don't you wail out hypock-cry-sees to us," he warned. "Don't say you didn't suspect our mission and watched in the notch of the pass to fix us while we come in the back way. And what's more don't tell us you didn't know them Kalzas Indians was down in the cañon. From the signs of your camp you bin here near as long as they have, and you sat square on your sweatin' haunches 'thout liftin' a finger to watch 'em die by inches. Lettin' 'em die a livin' death on the vein for fear they'd tumble to and snatch it.

"Teslin, you ain't a man. You ain't even a cave-man. A cave-man's the pinnacle of civilization and refinement to you. You're the original slime, a bit of primeval pus, an abortion as slipped in unnoticed in the six days the world was makin'!"

Sark had seldom seen Tom in such a passion.

All the way across the moraine to the mile-distant talus slope where they had cached their outfit and left their dogs, he denounced the Teslin Indian and continued to denounce him while Eric overhauled the packs.

"It's sheer killin' me to think of what he might 'a' done in them twenty or eighteen or whatever days he's bin here!" he raved. "But that's the way with them Indians as turns hull whites. They's putrid, every one of 'em! Say, hold on, what you goin' to do with that crucible—melt salve?"

"No, Tom, I'm going to steal five minutes from those poor, afflicted beggars to test this sample of ours. Five minutes won't make any difference to them, and it means a lot to us. Set a match to that débris there, and I'll run it down."

The shale-like stuff in the crucible melted quickly in the fierce heat of the fire Bassett kindled.

Eric cooled it in the snow, tumbled it on to his palm and took out his knife to scrape it for color.

But he had hardly laid blade to it when he dropped it with a sharp exclamation, whipped out the silver match-box he had taken the ore out of, scooped it back into the box and snapped the lid shut.

"Coracite, Tom!" he bellowed, trembling all over. "I felt I ought to know it."

"Coracite? What in blazes is that?"

"One of the radium ores. Carnotite, the Colorado stuff's, another, and pitchblend's another."

"Radium!" shrilled Tom. "Ain't it worth thousands of dollars a speck?"

"It sure is, and there aren't figures to tell the value of the claims we've staked. It'll go up into the billion billions, Tom, and we'll own the bloody earth! No wonder Teslin Albert kept it dark. That's where his millions are coming from. He's been mining it all these years, bit by bit, and he must have carried it out encased in a silver box. Silver's about the only thing that could have handled this high-grade stuff safely. For it's darned high-grade, partner, so high-grade that it burned my palm in a wink of an eye. See!"

Eric held out his hand on which showed a red blotch in the middle of the palm.

"You see," he went on breathlessly, "it's been cast up here by volcanic action, and the original solvent that held it is holding it still."

"How holdin' it still?" interjected Bassett uncomprehendingly.

"There's perpetual frost Winter and Summer in that cañon," his partner exposited, "and the solvent plastered all over it and through it is solidly frozen. Fire sets it free, and that's what's the matter with the bucks. They're camped right on the vein. Their tepee fires have been steadily melting the solvent and unceasingly reducing the ore, and the emanations have been getting to them every blasted minute of twenty days and nights."

"Emanations? What's them, pardner?"

"Rays is a simpler term. It's the radioactivity that the basic stuff transmits. It's a great cure, Tom, but put it on too strong and it destroys tissue as the hot Spring sun melts snow. Our remedy for the Kalzas bucks is to yank them off the vein!"

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"Then for the love of Heaven come on and yank!" appealed Tom, grasping his rifle and dashing back across the moraine. "Them billion billions is enough to craze a man, but blamed if the lives of them Indians don't loom bigger. I know how they's sufferin', 'cause I know the sting of them ruinous rays in the leetle bit of coracite Teslin Albert slipped into our campfire that night on the Macmillan River. Must 'a' bin the last chunk he had left from slippin' into Sagum's camp-fires all the way out, Eric, or else he'd 'a' stayed on with us!"

"Sure, Tom, and now I can guess the route Teslin took when he left us. He went on up the Macmillan and cut into the Kalzas Range from the south. He knew where he was going. It was a lot shorter trail, and that's the way we'll go out with the cinch on our billion billions. Kalzas Pass'll let us right down on to the slope of the mother range, and it'll let us down on to the Macmillan River."

THE increasing rapidity of their pace prohibited further speculation, and the freed huskies running at their heels, the partners swept up the slant of the moraine.

The moment their heads topped the stones they beheld black torrents of smoke rolling like thunder-clouds from the cañon's rims.

"By the pelts of the Pellys, Eric," rasped Bassett, "that atavism of a Teslin's gone and fired her!"

With a terrific effort they geared their mad sprint up another notch.

As they broke into the gap of the pass, Teslin Albert broke out, a sable figure flying through the smoke and the fiery rain of cinders.

He was maneuvering to dodge Sark and Bassett and escape from them in the descending pall which rolled forward like a rushing night. He turned along the right edge of the moraine, but Eric headed him off.

He doubled back toward the left, but at a sign to chase the huskies dashed slavering in his way, and when to evade them he made a desperate plunge through the center Bassett leaped full upon him out of the ambush of the smoke and bore him down.

The instant he saw that Tom had the Teslin fast, Eric dashed on to where the funnel of the pass began to widen, in the hope of reaching the hemmed-in Kalzas tribe, but a huge blast of flame one hundred feet high smote him, and his eyebrows and beard burned off, the skin of his face shriveled up and his lungs filled with the smarting smoke he staggered back half smothered.

Into that pit of burning no man would ever go. As at the beginning of time, the mountain chasm was consuming in the kilns of chaos. The abysmal fire of the spruce logs, piled many feet deep, was loosing the grip of the eternal frost.

The ore bed of Kalzas Cañon extending under the base of the palisades was crumbling as it had crumbled in Sark's crucible. The undermined palisades themselves were crashing from the clouds, and the precious coracite, smearing the lurid flame-glare with a ghastly phosphorescence, was seeping back to earth's heart whence it sprung. The priceless vein was lost forever.

Sark looked on appalled, and turned to glimpse Bassett, the Indian still tightly gripped in his hands, standing at his shoulder.

An instant Bassett's flame-carmined eyes embraced the horrific inferno and then fixed like lances of fire on Teslin Albert's eyes.

With a jerk of his rigid arms he heaved the Indian forward and with his rifle muzzle spurned him down the side of the molten pit.

"You hydrophoby-ridden spawn of a skunk!" he snarled, leaning over and holding the rifle ready. "You kin either come up or stay down!"

Teslin Albert stayed down.

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THE CAMP-FIRE
A Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers.

LOTS of you have traveled many thousands of miles. Perhaps merely as a matter of routine business. Some of you as Victor Hope has traveled—adventuring. But he is one of the busiest little travelers I know. At this writing he is in New Zealand, and in one of his letters he says that one night, having time on his hands, he dug up an atlas and figured out how many distinct trips he had made—distinct trips only. These totaled 115, of which eighteen were by land—foot, train, saddle, coach or automobile. The total distance covered on land amounted to considerably over 12,000 statute miles.

I've probably covered more than that myself, and so have you. But most of Victor Hope's trips were scattered all over the earth, not mere ordinary trips from New York to Chicago or from New Orleans to Montreal. His other ninety-seven trips were by sea, and they have carried him to thirty-six different countries and possessions—to some of them several times. And he counts only those between July, 1901, and March, 1915—less than fourteen years. In all, he has covered 211,900 statute miles in this time.

IN STEAMSHIPS he has done 129,740 nautical miles; in sailing vessels, 43,000. (The nautical mile, you will recall, is 800 feet longer than the statute mile—6,080 vs. 5,280 feet.)

His longest voyage without touching land covered 122 days. The next, 84 days. Both by sail. Then follow voyages, by sail or steam, of 46, 44, 43, 32, 26, 26, 24, 22 days, etc. The mileage of his longest distinct trips, some of them including both sea and land, run: 17,000, 9,000, 9,000, 8,500, 8,200, 7,500, 6,000, 6,000, 4,500, 4,200, 4,200, 4,000, 3,500, 3,400, 3,400, 3,300, 3,300, 3,300, 3,300, etc., all in nautical miles.

OF COURSE these distances are only approximate. Also, quite possibly, some one will say, "Oh, anybody can make a claim like that!" Well, I can't prove Mr. Hope's statement. I know him and, for myself, accept his statement at its full face value. Also, I *can* prove the part of it covered by the last two years or so. And probably Mr. Hope can prove up in black and white over at least part of the years before that.

For he has hit upon a simple but ingenious method of proving his travels beyond question, so far as dates and distances covered are concerned. On his travels he sends signed post-cards to me or to himself in care of *Adventure* from various places on his route, the postmarks and signatures proving he was in certain places at certain times.

OF COURSE it is conceivable that a man might arrange to have others mail signed cards for him, but it would be a good deal of crooked work for what would be gained by it. In Victor Hope's case this was not done, for his mail was forwarded by us to various points along his route and he replied en route to letters from me.

How about some of the rest of you who've gone scattering over the earth? Let the Camp-Fire hear from you if you've beaten Victor Hope's record for the last fourteen years. More than three consecutive trips for the same line will not be counted. Only distinct trips counted. Return trips counted as distinct trips. All distances in statute, *not* nautical, miles. Give start and end, distance and approximate dates of each trip. Note longest voyage without touching land. Distinguish between land and sea trips and between sail and steam.

THIS offers a fine chance for liars, but what's the use of lying to the Camp-Fire? We meet in good-fellowship and on

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the square, and I don't believe any of you will take advantage of it. There may be some credit in some lies, but not in such easy and safe and childish lying as this would be. Wouldn't be sportsmanlike.

And I don't know that it would be so safe after all. It's a dangerous bunch to "pull anything" on. There's always likely to be some one who knows you, or who has been "there" himself. I can recall quite a few tall tales that came into this office and, even without appearing in print, were "nailed" by three or four different people.

AS TO the future. Let's start a contest to see who covers most ground during the year, beginning either September 1st or October 1, 1915. Same conditions as above. Routine trips don't count. Proof must be furnished in every case by signed post-cards mailed to this office and held till the sender asks for them at the end of the year. Mark each post-card with a big C, to show that it is to be kept and recorded.

That ought to make an extremely interesting contest and matter of record. I've an idea it will open the eyes of some of the stay-at-homes who have no idea of what a world-wanderer and adventurer does in the way of covering ground.

SAYS Ross Ellis of his story in this issue —and he speaks from first-hand knowledge:

All the incidents, of course, are simply fiction. Such an organization as the "Hubtown-Millville Agreement" did exist some years ago, and sums of money were tossed out to piratically-minded young men with almost the nonchalance that *Demarest* displayed in dealing with *Stone*.

CAPTAIN George Albert Schreiner is an old favorite among us for reasons that show through his "Moods of War" in this number. Telling his own experiences is a good test of a man. And there is something restful and even comforting in reading about the Boer War in these days when the gigantic European conflict makes all other wars seem almost like pastoral pursuits, with men butchered by thousands and tens of thousands almost as a matter of daily routine, and with new engines and methods of warfare that make the wars of the "good old days" seem very far in the past indeed. They say that at the single battle of Neuve Chapelle more men were killed and more ammunition expended than during all the years of the entire Boer War.

SOMEHOW war nowadays seems less like war and more like the callous slaughtering of men in great bodies, with no importance attached in their slaughter except as it may constitute one of many, many small moves in a great game which as a whole the individual pawns can not even glimpse. The giving of a man's life is too tiny a matter to be worth mentioning or considering—except to him and to those who will mourn for him.

IN THE Great Game that is played by a few men with all the other men as helpless pawns the death of one pawn, or a hundred or a thousand pawns, is unnoticed. The pawns must die by tens and hundreds of thousands, even by the million, before the total of their deaths is worthy of consideration—when the death-toll runs so high as that, it means a shortage in the supply of pawns for playing the Great Game the few have started.

I can't quite join with the increasing number who turn from modern war in complete disgust, crying "The glory hath departed!" For the real glory in giving one's life doesn't lie in having the giving noticed, but in giving worthily according to one's lights. And yet I wonder whether there isn't something the matter with our lights.

ANYHOW, as I say, it's a relief to turn back to the Boer War, when things were different. Especially when war is presented to us through the eyes of a soldier so little drenched in its unkindness and ugliness as is Captain Schreiner.

I think most of you know already that he was an officer in the famous Staats Artillery, is an eminent authority on high explosives, a highly trained and splendidly educated military expert, was for some years a prominent newspaper man in Texas, and that many of the despatches from Europe you have read day by day since the beginning of the war are of his writing.

RAYMOND BARRETT, author of "The Red Alphabet," is one of at least four Charles R. Barretts who live in Chicago. So, for his stories, he signs as above. "I have been so often asked to pay their bills and read their love-letters and father

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their brain-children that I have been driven to attempt to preserve my individuality, even though I thereby lose my identity."

Mr. Barrett was born in Saratoga Springs, N. Y., was graduated from the University of Chicago in 1897, and has been in Chicago ever since, most of the time in publicity work.

He takes us behind the scenes of his complete novel in this issue:

"The Red Alphabet" grew out of the idea of the possibilities for crime and wealth open to an organized band of crooks and grafters who whould hide their identities under alphabetical "monakers" and thus be able to cooperate in lawlessness without the haunting fear that some of their number might turn State's evidence.

JUST when and how the idea first occurred to me I do not know, for the story is the growth of years of thought and much useless plotting. Undoubtedly many of the incidents were suggested by newspaper accounts of actual events and by the stories of other writers who have depicted fictitious crimes and criminals; but the story itself is mine, "for better or for worse." It was finished before I became familiar with the atrocities of the "apaches" of Paris; and was in typewritten form, just as it now stands, when the police scandal involving Lieutenant Becker, "Gyp the Blood," *et al.*, startled New York. Several of my friends, who had read the story in manuscript, commented upon its likeness in some particulars to the Becker scandal; and I myself felt that fact had once more outdone fiction.

THE scene of the story is purposely indefinite. If it were presented on the stage, the play-bill would locate it in "any large city." This is because my attitude was not that of a reformer, but of a teller of thrilling tales. However, any one who is acquainted with Chicago will be able to locate pretty accurately several of the incidents. "The Avenue" down which *Smith* followed *Rosalie*, is Michigan Avenue, whereon the original of "Alpha House" might be found in juxtaposition to Automobile Row. The street where *Virginia* is kidnapped is on the West Side; it was immediately identified by my wife, who had visited the neighborhood with me. The saloon where the "death-hand" murder took place is almost a photograph of a ramshackle place built during Chicago's World's Fair, across from the Exposition grounds; it has recently been razed. "The Strip" in a general way corresponds to the "red-light" district that lies between Chicago's business center and its three great residence sections. "Queer Street," and the deserted, rat-infested house there, can be found in any of the boom suburban subdivisions on the prairies surrounding Chicago. I repeat, however, that the story is not a story of Chicago, but the narration of what might happen in any large American city.

AS A whole, the characters are merely creatures of the author. One or two of them have been endowed with the characteristics of real persons; but in such cases I have made no attempt to be true to life. Chicago never had a Vice Commission, such as is described in "The Red Alphabet;" but other large cities have.

The incident of the "death-hand" murder in the saloon is taken from a newspaper account of such a killing. The dealing of the death hand, and the shooting down of the victim by the masked men, actually occurred. The crime was supposed to be a Black Hand affair, and so far as I know, the murderers were never caught. The killing did not occur, however, in the saloon in which I have placed it.

THE kidnaping of *Virginia* happened to me in a dream, which so impressed me that I got out of bed to jot down the details. It was my wife who was whisked away from me in the dream; but the setting off of the cigar-lighter in my pocket, and the remark about "giving the fellow a light if he'd asked for it," are just as I dreamed them. Let me add, parenthetically, that, though little troubled by dreams, I have more than once got from a dream a suggestion which I was later able to use to advantage. Whether this is the subconscious cerebration of the born story-teller, or the indigestion resulting from my refusal to go hungry to bed, I leave to the psychologists to decide.

OUR identification cards remain free to any reader. The two names and addresses and a stamped envelope bring you one.

The cards bear this inscription, printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of ADVENTURE, New York, U. S. A., stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one friend, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. The names and addresses will be treated as confidential by us. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for purposes of business identification. Later, arrangements may perhaps be made for money deposits to cover cable or telegraph notifications. Cards furnished free of charge, *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application. Send no applications without the two names and two addresses in full.* We reserve the rght to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Later, for the cost of manufacture, we may furnish, instead of the above cards, a card or tag, proof against heat, water and general wear and tear, for adventurers when actually in the jungle, desert, etc.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give the two names and addresses in full when applying.*

SOME time ago George Shepherd, whose Central American stories you will remember, wrote something especially for you of the Camp-Fire, and I've been saving it carefully till our space permitted using it in full. Those of you who know the hot countries will, I think, be largely inclined to back up what he says. Personally I had never thought of it before, but it looks sound to me.

We have all read Kipling's lament of the British soldier who longed to return to India, and of late,

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since we in America have come into closer relations with a number of tropical countries, we have heard a great deal of talk from our own people about the Lure of the Tropics, the Call of the Equator, and the like. To those who have never been below the Tropic of Cancer the thing is a bit incomprehensible, though they are willing to admit that there may be some vague, romantic charm to the countries down in that part of the world. But others who, for business or pleasure, have made flying visits to those lands of mysterious enchantment, will not go so far. They have found bad hotels, worse railroads (if indeed any at all), general discomfort of living coupled with high prices, and in compensation nothing but a climate whose only virtue is that it enables one to wear the same outfit of clothes through the whole year.

SO WHEN the old tropical resident assures his traveling fellow countryman: "I tell you, old man, it'll get you. Just stay here a year, and when you go home you'll never be content until you come back again," the tourist smiles incredulously. At first glance his doubt seems justified. How can any sensible person be irresistibly drawn to a land that, while it has few of the comforts and conveniences of our northern civilization, can offer not only all the discomforts and inconveniences with which we have been familiar, but a large assortment of entirely new ones?

NEVERTHELESS, Kipling was right, and all the others who say the same are right. The Lure of the Tropics does exist, and it is powerful and compelling. But it has nothing to do with brilliant, cloudless skies, the Southern Cross shedding its refulgence through the soft tropic night, broad avenues of royal palms, the soft throbbing of guitars, beautiful, dark-eyed damsels throwing roses from balconies, or any similar aspects of life in the tropics.

This Lure has roots that go much deeper than any of these mere surface phenomena. They strike down into the firm subsoil of man's own vanity, and from it they draw sufficient nourishment to support a very hardy plant. To be explicit, the whole sum and substance of the matter is that the average white man in the average tropical country is a person of many times the importance that he is at home. His income may be relatively no larger; his manner of living may be no more, and often is less, comfortable; but he is a person of distinction, and in a thousand ways this is daily borne in on him. Of some, of course, it is the ruin; of others, the making; but to all it gives a very comfortable sense of self-satisfaction.

THE real reason why Kipling's Tommy Atkins wants to go back to India has nothing to do with bright skies or green fields, but lies in the fact that in India he can hire a native to clean his boots and polish his buttons and sweep his barrack-room —things that in England he does for himself. The young American who, for a moderate enough salary, runs a banana farm down in Central America, lords it over two or three hundred negroes, lives in his own house and is waited on hand and foot. When he goes to town he is Mr. So-and-So of Such-a-place, and any shop will give him credit or any hotel cash his check. On the same salary in New York he might be living in a hall bedroom, and if he forgot to put any change in his pocket when he started down-town to his office, he would either walk or go back and get it.

LET me give an instance or two from my own experience. At one time I was doing some work in a Spanish-American country that involved a good deal of travel in remote districts. I remember once, after a week or so in the mountains, coming out at a little village of five or six hundred inhabitants. In the entire place I could discover but two houses that had board floors and roofs that gave promise of being weather-proof. One of these, it appeared, was the jail (then unoccupied), and the other the office of the chief of police. I presented my credentials to that official and in fifteen minutes my men were quartered in the jail and I was in possession of the office, while the chief, immensely flattered at the favor I had shown him, was sending his police force out to forage for us. Let any one try to do anything like that in a village in the United States and see how far he gets with it!

ANOTHER time I arrived in a considerable city where I was entirely unknown. I had with me six men for whom I was bound to provide food and shelter, and my only possessions then were not sufficient even to send a cable to the headquarters of my company. I called on the head of the largest American enterprise in the city, explained my position and asked for a loan of two hundred dollars, meaning, of course, the local silver currency. Without a question he wrote me an order on his cashier. When I presented it I discovered that I had been misunderstood, and that the order was for two hundred dollars in American gold—twice as much as I had asked for.

Is it any wonder that we like to go back to the tropics?

LETTER FRIENDS

Note—This is a service for those of our readers who want some one to write to. For adventurers afield who want a stay-at-home "letter-bunkie," and for stay-at-homes, whether ex-adventurers or not, who wish to get into friendly touch with some one who is out "doing things." We publish names and addresses—the rest is up to you, and of course we assume no responsibility of any kind. Women not admitted.

Here are some men to start with, most of them men who have themselves adventured but are now tied down by illness or accident. You who are still out among the branching highways of the world, why not drop them a line? And you, too, who once wandered free or have only dreamed of it.

(1) George H. Hicks, 3 Mt. Pleasant St., St. Johnsbury, Vt.

(2) A. I. Macdonald, 70 Church St., Springfield, Mass.

(3) J. G. Leroy, Y. M. C. A., Brandon, Man.

(4) E. Windle, Avalon, S. C. I., Calif.

(5) Henry C. Winters, No. 2379. 2nd Remounts, British Expeditionary Force, care of G. P. O., Le Havre, France. (An Australian.)

(6) Lesly Schmidt, 205 N. 6th St., Great Falls, Montana.

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(7) Hermann Zabel, Co. F, 2nd Battalion Engineers, Presidio, San Francisco.

(8) Frank A. Hamberry, 1322 N. 22nd St., Philadelphia.

(9) Jack Fitzwallace, Y. M. C. A., Portland, Oregon.

(10) Al De Coste, Box 5, care E. L. Howe, Ft. Wayne, Ind.

IT'S been some time since we've had with us Stephen Allen Reynolds, one of our oldest contributors, and we're glad to welcome him back as one of the two authors of "Providence and the Green Apples."

INFORMATION DIRECTORY

IMPORTANT: Only items like those below can be printed—standing sources of information. No room on this page to ask or answer specific questions. Recommend no source of information you are not *sure* of. False information may cause serious loss, even loss of life. *Adventure* does its best to make this directory reliable, but assumes no responsibility therefor.

For data on the Amazon country write Algot Lange, care Explorers' Club, 345 Amsterdam Ave., New York City. Replies only if stamped, addressed envelope is enclosed and only at Mr. Lange's discretion, this service being purely voluntary.

For the Banks fisheries, Frederick William Wallace, editor *Canadian Fisherman*, 35 St. Alexander St., Montreal. Same conditions as above.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dep't, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii and Alaska, Dep't of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dep't of Ag., Com., and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

For Central and South America, John Barrett, Dir. Gen., Pan-American Union, Wash., D. C.

For R. N. W. M. P., Comptroller Royal North West Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can., or Commissioner, R. N. W. M. P., Regina, Sask. Only unmarried British subjects, age 22 to 30, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs., accepted.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal, Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

Hudson's Bay Region—Department of the Interior, Ottawa, Can., and Board of Trade, The Pas, Manitoba, Can.

For Adventurers' Club, get data from this magazine.

For the American Legion, The Secretary, The American Legion, 10 Bridge St., New York.

Mail Address and Forwarding.—This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied.

NO MAN can guess, at this writing, what the international situation will be when this reaches your eye. The present crisis in which the United States finds itself will at least prove to the doubters that this country too may be drawn into war at any time. Our unpreparedness, also, becomes plainer every day. At this moment the most practical thing a good American can do is to enroll in the American Legion. Write to 10 Bridge Street, New York. Do it now!

SHORTLY after this reaches you Algot Lange will probably start on his third expedition to South America and may want a few good men. He has had exceptional advantages for learning the resources of the Amazon region and expects to profit by them.

The plan is to work the northern by-rivers of the lower Amazon for mahogany and Spanish cedar, much of the time in unsurveyed regions. A power house-boat will be the expedition's headquarters. A commercial outlet has been arranged in this country for the timber. Placer gold may be found. Men must be able-bodied, courageous, but not reckless or "booze-fighters." ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

WANTED —MEN

NOTE.—We offer this corner of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to our readers. Naturally we can not vouch for any of the letters, the writers thereof, or any of the claims set forth therein, beyond the fact that we receive and publish these letters in good faith. We reserve the privilege of not publishing any letters or parts of a letter. Any inquiry for men sent to this magazine will be considered as intended for publication, at our discretion, in this department, with all names and addresses given therein printed in full, unless such inquiry contains contrary instructions. In the latter case we reserve the right to substitute for real names any numbers or other names. We are ready to forward mail through this office, but assume no responsibility therefor. **N.B.—Items asking for money rather than men will not be published.**

ONE OR two young men, preferably somebody in Brooklyn, N. Y., at the present time. Fellows with red-blood and adventurous natures. Am contemplating trip to Central or South America, which requires some nerve and ability to rough it. Working way down, etc. Here's an opportunity for some Brooklynite to connect with a stickee, from the word Go, to the last bell.—Address L. B. SMITH, care General Delivery, Station W, Brooklyn, N. Y.

YOUNG man, to go to Oregon to take up land. Must be able to stand hard work, as intentions are to schooner across continent. Married man with small capital preferred. —Address HERBERT COBURN, JR., 1010 Washington Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

Inquiries for opportunities instead of men are NOT printed in this department.

PARTNER to join me for adventure and profit. Must be genial. Well-timbered country. Write for particulars. Must pay his share of three or four months' trip.—Address C. A. HALL, Sonora, Cal.

PARTNER to join me on hunting and trapping trip next Fall in northern Alberta, Can. Must be thoroughly reliable. Each to stand his share of the expense. Ought to have at least $350 to start. Intend to locate there if opportunities for business can be found.—Address WILLIAM B. DENNING, 146 W. 24th St., New York City.

Inquiries for opportunities instead of men are NOT printed in this department.

PARTNER to go anywhere if there is adventure and a small profit. Am 18 yrs., 5 ft. 4½ in.; can ride, shoot and care for myself. Address F. A. GILSON, 206 State St., Niles, Mich.

MARRIED couple 20-25 years old, willing to go with myself and wife on a cruise along American coast and on rivers and lakes. Strictly partnership basis. Each to stand his share of expenses for purchase of cabin cruiser, which will mean about $300 each. Will work as we cruise. Intend to be gone two years or more.—Address Al. Bringman, 130 Dudley St., Jersey City, N. J.

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LOST TRAILS

NOTE.—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right, in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada.

CANAVAN, DAVID. Born Belfast, Ireland. Fair complexion; 5 ft. 8 in. Met him Helena, Mont. Beat our way to Salt Lake City on O. S. L., then returned to Ogden, Utah. He intended to go to Butte when we separated.—Address EDDIE SPARKS, 500 West 176th St., New York City

"WINDY" BACHE, "Ballyhoola," "Star Pointer" Brumby or any of the boys that were in Troop G, 5th U. S. Cavalry, at Aibonita, P. R., at time of the hurricane in August '99. "Machette" wants news of you.—Address F. C. CRUME, 7521 Washington Blvd., Pittsburgh, Pa.

PATTERSON, ROBERT J., of Cleveland O., one-time prize-fighter; ring-name Battling Terry Jones. Well known at one time among ringsiders of Australia. Fought as 2d Lieut. of Artillery under Madero. Last heard of was in Engineering Corps, U. S. Army. Have important news for him.—Address THOMAS B. O'HAGAN, Gen. Del., Washington, D. C.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

TAYLOR, H. E. (Hal). 6 ft., 180 lbs., blond; former Chicagoan Purdue man about '04. Sup't on National R. R. at Tehuantepec, Mexico, later in '04; shift boss at Carthage Mines, San Antonio, N. Mexico, '05. Hit Honolulu early in '06. Last heard from en route to 'Frisco early in April '06. Baseball pitcher, crack shot and good mixer. Communicate with me at Dayton. Back to Mexico if you say the word.—Address RED CULLINS.

KEYS, LEVY, disappeared from home at Farmers' Station, Highland Co., Ohio, 1859. Belonged to Odd Fellows. Supposed to have gone to Africa or Australia. Any information concerning him or his particular chum Albert Brayton greatly appreciated.—Address L. T. 276.

McCANDLESS, ALEXANDER, and descendants, who bought Delka, York Co., Pa., from the heirs of William Penn in 1774. He had a son or grandson in the Revolution. Would like data concerning son also.—Address M. A. HOOVER, 1631 Q St., N. W., Washington, D. C.

SCOTT, F. B., newspaper writer, sailor and soldier of fortune. Palled with me, Halifax, N. S., and Capetown 1899, Paris 1900. Was in Pittsburgh, 1910 and California 1912. Grub stake will be returned. Have interesting South American and China proposition. Big prospects.—Address CAPT. LEIGHTON, H. M. N., care *Adventure.*

Inquiries will be printed three times. In the January and July issues all unfound back names will be printed again.

DUNCAN, GEORGE RILEY. Formerly of Holt Co., Mo. Lived on farm near Kremlin, Okla., in 1895 and it was said he moved to Colorado few years later.—Address J. B. DUNCAN, Grace Hotel, 414 Market St., St. Louis, Mo.

NOLAN, JACK. Came to Canada 1911 from Sheffield, England. One-time Private in the K. R. R. Last heard of Crescent Lake, Saskatchewan, Can.—Address JAMES SMITH, 203 Emerson Ave., Toronto, Can.

SMITH, R. I., brother. Born March 12, 1889; about 5 ft. 7 ins. tall, and has blue eyes and light hair. Last heard of in Grand Junction, Colo., 1908.—Address HARRY C. SMITH, Star Route, Sulphur, Okla.

MILLER, T. H. Canadian, brother; 52 yrs., 5 ft. 10½ ins.; blue eyes. Last heard from Wingfield, Kansas, traveling salesman, June 1906. Mother failing and anxious to see or at least hear from him.—Address E. W. M., 232 Dufferin St., Toronto, Can.

NAMES and addresses of comrades who served in Company L, 1st Regiment Maryland Volunteer Infantry, during war with Spain.—Address BENJAMIN SHOEMAN, 1360 Newberry Ave., Chicago, Ill.

PEDDER, RICHARD. Scotchman; last heard of near St. Paul, Minn., about 25 years ago. Information as to fate desired by sisters.—Address L. G. FRASER, Virden, Manitoba, Can.

LANTZ, SAMUEL, JOSEPH. 5 ft. 6 ins.; black hair, hazel eyes; two gold teeth show in upper and two in lower jaw. American; talks Spanish. Excellent shot, rifle or revolver, hip or shoulder. With me Mexico 1913 and hunting in Ore., Jan. 1914. Important syndicate wants our claim in Lower California, but don't cross border.—Address JAMES L. BENSON, Gen. Del., Santa Barbara, Cal.

SHEEHAN, JAMES. Last heard from Orenco, Oregon, 1911. Landscape gardener, salesman; 5 ft. 7 ins., 165 lbs.; fair and probably gray, 45 yrs.: native of New York. "Billy" inquires.—Address CPL. L. L. CALLAHAN, Co. "D," 14th Inf., Ft. St. Michael, Alaska.

BEE, TAVER, brother of Carlos Bee, former Dist. Attorney, San Antonio, Texas; worked with me Mexico, 1901-2. Last heard of Cassa Mauer, Chihuahua, Mexico. Write me. Contemplate trip through South America to Argentine, similar lines.—Address FRED F. COOPER, care Hotel Escaleute, Ash Fork, Arizona.

BEST, F. P. Known as "Kid Freddie Best" or "Slats." Soldier of fortune, cow-puncher, telegraph-operator and all-round R. R. man. In Mexico 1910; Cuba 1912. Last heard from in Spanish Honduras.—Address "PINKIE," Box 765, Havana, Cuba.

KANE, BARNEY. Born Columbus, Colo. Co., Texas, July 2, 1894. Last heard of Chicago, May 29, 1913. His father is very anxious to hear from him.—Address BARNEY KANE, SR., 3517 Ave. H, Galveston, Texas.

SCHOONER, FITZ J. BABSON. Left New York for Jacksonville, Feb. 28, 1914. Am anxious for information regarding craft.—Address, L. T., 277.

DABYMPLE, CHARLES S. Last heard from Calexico, Cal., August, 1912. Worked for Construction Company in Mexico.—Address JANE DABYMPLE, 455 E. 41st, Portland, Ore.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

PENAULT, FRANK. Last heard of High River, Alberta, starting north for Peace River. Lost all trace of him Winter 1911.—Address D. L. SCANLON, U. S. S. *Washington*, care P. M., New York.

SNODGRASS, R. L., a machinist called "Lee." Last heard of November 1914, Syracuse, Kansas.—Address A. M. SNODGRASS, 289 10th St., Portland, Ore.

POHL, BERNARD H., brother. 24 years old, 5 ft. 10 ins.; light complexion, roman nose. Last heard of San Diego, Cal., Jan. 1912.—Address NORBERT E. POHL, 5034 Maple Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

ROSE, JACK, of Hall and Rose, Indian songs and dances. Last heard of Melbourne, Australia, 1913. Indian name, *Lone Eagle.*—Address F. M. KELLEY, 309 Grant Ave., New Castle, Pa.

COMRADES 30th and 4th U. S. Inf. from 1867 until 1885, especially in Co. I.—Address PARKER H. DICE, 831½ Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

ABERNATHY, SUMNER, brother. Last heard of Helena, Mont., 1890. Medium height, dark complexion. May have gone into Canada.—Address ALFRED H. ABERNATHY, Monteagle Board of Trade, Monteagle, Tenn.

WALLENSTEIN, WILLIAM J., son. Enlisted in the U. S. Army, 8th Cavalry, Troop D, stationed at Fort Robinson, Nebr., in 1909; discharged in 1912.—Address MRS. FLORA L. WILSON, 250 Spadina Ave., Toronto, Ont., Can.

GAYLORD, C. W. Last heard of down in the Mid-Continent oil-fields, around Tulsa, Okla.—Address E. J. STAUB, Box 322, McLeod, Alta, Can.

SCOTT, NORWOOD, of Lansdowne, Pa. Last heard from in central West, 1911. Write me.—Address E. M. U., 317 Boscobel St., Nashville, Tenn.

KLEMANN, ROBERT, uncle, son of William Klemann, born San Antonio; later lived in Laredo, Texas.—Address MRS. J. W. CARTERBURY, 1413 Adams St., Brownsville, Texas.

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BUTCHER, BOB, from Kansas City, Mo. Last heard of in Los Angeles, Cal., working for a movie film company.—Address T. Coleman, Fulton, Mo.

DUNN, JAMES, of B Co., Tia Janina, Mexico.—Address T. L. WHITE, 88th Victoria Fusiliers, Willows Camp, Victoria, B. C., Can.

WEBB, PERCY. M. C., '10-'14, present location.—Address L. T. 275.

BIRCH, W. EKIN or J. M., PILARY M., who were in service of Gobierno Nicarayuense "Telayesta" 1910.—Address L. T. 275.

COMRADES, 17 Field Artillery who served in Philippines. —Address THOMAS E. GERNON, 919 Henry Clay Ave., New Orleans, La.

HARRIS, JOE, of Cincinnati, Ohio. Last heard from in Webster, N. D., in 1909.—Address SAM HARRIS, Firebaugh, Cal.

O'NEAL, FRANK. Depot Harbor, Ont., 1900-1. Write your old friend "Mac."—Address MacC., care *Adventure.*

WEAVER, JOSEPH C., late of Providence. Kindly send present location to "Blood-brother."

THE following have been inquired for in full in the June or July issue of *Adventure.* They can get the name of inquirer from this magazine:

ALLEN, ROBERT; Asher, Orlie; Baker, Edward E., 4th Inf. Co. A.; Bozan, R. W., goes by name of R. W. Pearson; Brown, Fred A. and Mary; Brue, Charlie (White), Milner, Idaho; Coddington, William; Cook, Elliott; Dennis, Lee A., Okla. 1906; Foster, John Frank; Futchison, George; Galloway, James R.; Gottlieb, Edward; Grace, E. Leslie; Hughes, Henry; King, Frank M., Winnfield, La., 1908; Leach, O. L. (Slim); Lloyd, Edmund, Box, John and George; McIntosh, James W., Victoria, B. C., 1898; Macpherson, J. W.; Maples, Clem M.; Massey-Lawless, Frank H. J. K., Melbourne in Dec. 1899; Mazurette, Alfred P., Montreal, 1892; Morrisey, John; Moyer, Ted; Nichols, Samuel R.; Prince, Ben, Memphis, Tenn.; Richard, Charlie E., Cardiff, Wales; Rimer, J. D., 4th Mo. Vol. 1898; Ryan, Billy; Ryan, Charles, Meacham, Ore.; Seery; Shea, Timothy, Los Angeles, 1911; Synder, Bill, of Wellesley Hills, Mass.; Spang, Chester; St. Clair, Fred; Trauhauf, Harold A.; Washburn, Bert; Wiley, Elsworth; Wilson, Sadie, Duluth, Minn. 1910; Wings, Claud C., Co. C, 9th Inf.; Wixson, Joe B.; Wright, James William, China.

MISCELLANEOUS: Corporal discharged Sept. 2, '12 from Troop F, 13th Cav.; Shipmates *Alice Knowles,* especially green hands, Miller of Los Angeles, Myers of Salida, Colo., Williams of New Orleans; Peterson, William (Pete); Watson, Will; Ahl, Bill; English, "Jess"; Vose, Jack; Seay, Clif; Rooney, Bill; Fry, Joe; Baldwin, "Baldy"; Chapman; Kennedy; Molleter; Benner; McKinney; Tyson; Keinricks; Carlysle, Bill; Knode; Appleton; Wilkes; Butler; Davis; Vanlemberg; Burnham; Jenkins; Rice; Bergin; Sullivan; Weinell; Armstrong; Shay; Shendel, and other knights of the "Big Stick" who worked for the W. E. Company in Bangor, Me., after the fire April 30, 1911. Orphan, adopted name, Violet McMaster.

NUMBERS 56, 68, 73, 76, W 93, W 107, W 140, W 150, W 153, W 183, W 184, W 189, W 195, W 203, W 211, W 212, W 215, W 231, W 250, W 254, C 189, C 205, L. T.. 207, L. T. 258. Please send us your present addresses Letters forwarded to you at addresses given us do not reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure.*

MANUSCRIPTS sent us by the following are being held by us, having been returned to us as unclaimed at the addresses furnished:

W. Lynch, Trenton, N. J.; Henry W. Edwards, New York; W. G. Gormley, Ontario, Canada; George Stillons, Chicago, Ill.; Francis Manston, Chicago, Cal.; James Perry, Brooklyn, N. Y.; E. V. B. von Brandenburg, New York.

RANDOLPH H. ATKIN, S. N. Morgan, L. M. Reap, Robert O'Shea, J. A. Bertram, I. Williams, J. C. Eastman, A. Gail Simson, please send us your present addresses. Mail sent to you at addresses given us doesn't reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure.*

IMPORTANT NOTICE

AS ANNOUNCED in the July issue, every item will be published three times, then taken out. But in the *January* and *July* numbers of each year we will publish the names of all who have been inquired for and remain unfound.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

In addition to the stories mentioned at the bottom of page 2, the following are scheduled for the September issue:

FORTY DOLLARS A FOOT *By Gordon McCreagh*

Holy Holly defies iron laws of Asia and takes movies of a religious festival in Tibet.

THE SECOND MATE OF THE BANSHEE *By W. Townend*

You know the author; he knows the sea. This tale has the force of a giant comber.

A KNOCK'S A BOOST *By Clinton H. Stagg*

A boomer town boosts itself till it is booster mad. Then some one swings the sledge-hammer.

ELNA PLAYS THE GAME *By George F. Stratton*

Crooked politics and a Governor's race for his wife, high up in the Idaho mountains.

THE SHERIFF OF KARNAK *By Octavus Roy Cohen*

Not Egypt, but Dixie; by a man from 'Way Down South.

A CASE IN DIPLOMACY *By Daniel Louis Hanson*

Which shows the long, desperate chances taken when Nation plays against Nation.

IN LETTERS OF PURPLE *By Stephen Allen Reynolds*

A new sort of mystery tale of big business which snaps a startling surprise.

GALLAGHER OF HEAVENLY PEACE *By Robert J. Pearsall*

A dramatic story of the farthest East.

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